

beast

EIGHT STORIES INSPIRED BY THE CLASSIC FAIRYTALE



STEPHANIE ALBA MADALYN BECK

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Table of Contents

The Fortune by Stephanie Alba
Perception by Madalyn Beck
Unlovable by Jessica Bucher
Reaching for the Stars by Jeannine Colette
Every Beautiful Piece by A.M. Johnson
The Forgotten Man by Caroline Nolan
The Thief and the Marauder by Amanda Richardson
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Eight Stories Inspired by the Fairytale,
Beauty and the Beast

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Jeannine Colette A.M. Johnson Caroline Nolan
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table of contents

The Fortune by **Stephanie Alba**

Perception by **Madalyn Beck**

Unlovable by **Jessica Bucher**

Reaching for the Stars by **Jeannine Colette**

Every Beautiful Piece by **A.M. Johnson**

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the fortune

Stephanie Alba

A TALE ABOUT changing your fate once it's already written, because knowing your future can be a blessing or a curse.

The Fortune
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I HADN'T BEEN back home in seven years. Seven long years that had given me enough time and space to become someone else. I wasn't just looking for space, I wanted to disappear. To be forgotten, and I suppose it worked for some time, but now, with my father gone, there was no other choice except to return and force people to remember something they'd long since buried in the back of their minds. You see, my father was the wealthiest man in Faluk and the owner of various corporations that now needed my undivided attention. Without our family businesses, our little fishing village would simply cease to function since we provided the majority of the jobs to its population. It was my "duty", as my mother had called it, and with everything they'd ever done for me, she was right. So I made my way home without plans to leave, all the while swallowing the sensation of choking on memories of who I used to be. The son that left, the lover that abandoned.

Faluk was a place that I turned away from after cutting all the thorny roots holding me down. Those roots people often call home, which in my case, were people in my life. I didn't just cut them; I tore them from the ground and refused to let them grow ever again, only returning to see my parents when necessary. Most times, I had them out to see me, citing work as an excuse for my lack of visits. But now, returning felt like a death sentence most people would certainly misunderstand. Only I knew the real reason for why I'd left the way I did despite the common assumption that I was an ungrateful shit. In truth, I'd left to make things better for others.

That's a lie. One I've told myself so many times I almost believed it.

I'd left to make things better for two people: myself and her. The girl that had always turned my world off its axis was what drove me away. But without the explanation for my reasoning, everyone, including her, assumed the worst. And that was okay. I could deal with being the villain. It was worth a tarnished reputation if it meant she was safe and I could be mildly content knowing that fact even if I had to leave and make others suffer. It was obvious she'd suffered by my leaving. After all, the scorned looks I received from her family and friends the second I stepped foot onto Faluk's boardwalk and docks could sear my skin off. But ultimately, I truly believed I was the only one that suffered. I'd been slowly strangled by those thorny

branches I had so desperately destroyed and was left hollow. I'd lost the girl I loved more than anything in the world in order to save her.

My mother had insisted that we meet at Dad's favorite bar, The Barnacle. I really wish she hadn't. Not only had the place conjured warm, yet aching memories of my deceased father, but it served as a public announcement that I'd come home. News would spread fast enough that by the end of the day everyone would know I was back. So much for making as little waves as possible.

As I entered the restaurant, I saw my mother sitting in the usual back booth she had often shared with my father. It wasn't uncommon for them to meet for lunch multiple times a week and I wondered how it felt to sit there without him. If it left me unsettled just to walk into the place, I could only imagine the emptiness it inflated into my mother's soul. Observing her for a moment, I noticed she was dressed more casually than usual. Her pearly white hair was up in a tight bun as always, but she was wearing a long-sleeved gray shirt and jeans. My mother never wore jeans in public unless she was gardening. Yet there she was, sipping her green tea, surrounded by people, in her gardening clothes. I wasn't sure what to expect after that.

When I approached her table, the corners of her rouged lips rose minimally as if my presence was both a welcome vision and a thorn in her side. I was the spitting image of my father in his mid-twenties and the sight of me likely reminded her not only of my dad breathing before her, but of a time when she was younger and had less invisible weight on her shoulders. It reminded me that everything in life is like a two-sided coin, complete with flipping stories that are tied together whether we want them to be or not. I often saw my father in the mirror staring back at me, but now the image was warped and confusing. My face was no longer carried a proud resemblance to the man that made me in every way, instead, it was a reminder of things gone and what lied ahead now because of it. I stood taller as I stared back at my mother. What kinds of images did I conjure for others I'd left behind? The thought left me swallowing a lump in my dry throat.

"Hi, Mom." I bent at the waist to kiss her powdered cheek. She felt thinner, her cheekbone protruding more than usual. As I tried to straighten,

she placed her palm on my other cheek and held me there. I didn't pull back till she'd caressed my face like she used to when I was a child and then dropped it suddenly upon feeling the stubble on my chiseled jaw.

"Oliver," she whispered in my ear. Even her voice seemed thinner and vacant of its standard command.

"It's good to see you," I mumbled, realizing that my being here wasn't a celebration. I bit back a laugh and shrugged. What was there to say at this point?

"There's no need to be awkward."

I'd been staring at the menu I didn't really need just to avoid her penetrating gaze. "I know," I said, finally meeting her electric green eyes. "This is complicated, though."

"Only as complicated as you make it."

With a raise of my brows, I said, "I just wasn't ready for...this."

"Which part? Your father dying? Returning home? Becoming the head of the business?" She'd lifted her hand as she said it with a nonchalance that frustrated me. "This place was always your destiny. You're the one that packed and left, no one kicked you out. Not even her."

My leaving was my mother's favorite thing to bring up, but next to that she absolutely adored guilting me over breaking my love's heart.

"Can we not do this right now?"

"Avoiding the subject doesn't just make it go away. After all," she shrugged again, looking outside the window before continuing. "It's all still here, isn't it? We are exactly as you left us, save for the presence of your father. If anything that should show you that time passes and you can actually lose things. People don't live forever and you only have so long to mend your ways before it's too late."

It was my turn to look out the window. The bay was choppy that day, waves cascading in and out, leaving the fishing boats to tilt from side to side as if they were on a seesaw. If the wind picked up enough the sails could tangle and cause severe damage. Small beads of rain pelted against the glass of the restaurant only to drizzle down in a race to the bottom. The foggy view outside was exactly the way I felt. Like all the people and places I was now immersed in were covered in a sheen layer of unfamiliarity. They no longer knew who I was. They no longer understood me just as I no longer understood them. We, the people of Faluk and I, were

all strangers to one another. And now circumstances forced us to become reacquainted.

My mother touched my hand with her bony, but gentle fingers coaxing me to look at her. I hesitated, and with that, she added, “She’s engaged, Oliver. This is your last chance.”

Just as I was about to address my mother’s concern, a man in his early thirties walked up to the booth and put his arm on my mother’s shoulder.

“Mrs. Bertrand, how are you today?”

My mother held my eyes for a moment, silently telling me something I couldn’t decipher, and then lifted her soft, wrinkly eyelids to his face.

“Hello Preston, I’ve been better,” she said, placing her hand atop his.

“Ah, I’m sure. I’ve been thinking of you quite a bit.” Then he looked to me and held out his hand. “Preston Prince, I take it you’re Oliver.”

Staring at his hand, I sized him up. He was dressed in neat, pressed navy slacks with a matching navy jacket, but his shirt was a bright coral that was almost blinding. The guy was good looking with blue icy eyes and slicked back blond hair. Yet something about him was off. His appearance and name gave the idea of Prince Charming, but all I saw was something wicked behind his all too sharp canines and crooked smile. I immediately didn’t like him. And I sure as hell didn’t like his hand placed on my mother as though he was steering her in his desired directions.

“Oliver,” my mother whispered and I snapped out of it, immediately playing dumb.

I stood and grabbed his hand, squeezing his clean knuckles against my brawny ones. “Sorry, yes, I’m Oliver Bertrand.”

Our eyes locked as I tried to surmise what it was about him that I didn’t like. His nostrils flared for a moment as if he already knew my negative sentiments. My mother cut in again. “Oliver, this is the lawyer handling the transition of the company into your name. He worked very closely with your father the last few months.”

“How did dad know?” I said, my eyes shooting toward my mother.

“He didn’t. Your father always liked to be prepared.”

Mr. Prince let go of my hand and sat down. Clearing his throat, he began, “Your father was simply changing things around in the company. I

was actually the one that suggested he prepare for the next steps in life. In my case, I was referring to retirement. I obviously didn't expect him to die so young with him being the epitome of health, but we're not in control of that are we?"

His question lingered in the air like a bad smell. It wasn't just insensitive but assuming. It was clear he thought he knew my father like the back of his hand.

"No we aren't," my mother answered, shaking her head. "And that is my cue to leave."

She rose out of her seat and put on her windbreaker, another item my mother would never have worn in public prior to my father's death. As she zipped it up, she added, "I think you two have a lot of paperwork to go over and I'm going to leave you to it. I already know about all of this, it's time for you to catch up, Oliver. I'll see you at home."

She patted Preston's shoulder and then leaned in to give me another kiss on the cheek.

Once we were alone, we were surrounded by each other's awkward, tomb-like silence. That is until he decided to dive right in.

"Right...well. Your father left me explicit instructions on how to proceed once you returned. I told him he needn't change anything, but he insisted on being prepared. It's as though he knew something was going to happen. Forgive me for being frank, he and I grew close," he paused, his smile curving with a cynical twist. "He seemed superstitious as if he'd heard his fortune or knew the exact day he'd die."

I'd been staring at my hands, at the crooked lines of my palm when he said this. He guffawed quietly, perhaps considering that his words sounded ridiculous. But what he didn't know was that while my father didn't know his fate, I knew mine. I'd been cursed with that information long ago and it had changed everything. Looking up at him, I cracked my fingers in forced nonchalance.

"Shall we begin?" He cleared his throat, likely sensing the tense awkward air around us. I shrugged my shoulders. I don't know what bothered me more: that I had no choice but to interact with the asshole, that he thought he knew me, or the way his brow cocked when he looked at me. Probably all of it.

Preston proceeded to spend the next hour and a half explaining the technicalities for transferring the titles into my name. In reality, it was

automatic since my father's will stated as much, but there were procedures for these things. Papers to sign. Tedious contracts to go over. It was excruciating. But by the end of our meal, that I had to pay for since he was technically an employee, I was officially the owner and chief executive of Bertrand Group. The fishing boats, the docks we rented, the fish packing factories, even the cubicles that ran the other parts of the business, they were all mine. My lungs constricted as I signed the last paper, not because I was afraid to continue in my amazing, honorable father's footsteps - no. It was because I was signing a contract that meant Faluk was now my permanent home and likely would be until the end of my own days. I'd die there just like my father did. It should have felt like an honor. It should have left me filled with pride that my father trusted me with his life's work, and it did. But it also guaranteed I'd idly witness things I never wanted to see.

As if the universe was in on the joke, Preston stood up at the end of lunch and said, "I hate to end this abruptly, but my fiancée is meeting me outside and I promised I'd join her for the flower arrangements I could give two shits about."

I rose, tossed a cash tip on the table, and began to walk out with him. People were staring at us. People I'd grown up with that now looked at me like I was an outcast. I grew distracted by their gossipy looks and whispered secrets. My entire walk was surrounded by nosy-bodies that clearly knew something I didn't. It wasn't till I stepped outside and saw Bellamy Charmant that I understood their curiosity. The few rays of sunlight bursting through the clouds framed her face that I'd dreamed of for years. She turned towards us with a gorgeous smile directed at Preston which immediately fell apart when she saw me standing beside him. The curves of her cheeks descended, no longer framing her lovely blue eyes that I'd never forgotten. Preston turned a bit to look at me and then back at Bellamy, but she recovered quickly and shook off her surprise. I wish I could've done the same.

I gripped Preston's shoulder and said, "Let me know if you need anything."

My family's driver had picked me up from the airport and driven me straight to the restaurant. It was probably for the best that I hadn't driven

myself into town; otherwise, I would've sped down the curvy back roads all the way to my parent's estate. They'd lived on the outskirts of Faluk in a chateau-like mansion that many admired. Owning various facets of the city allowed them the luxury of living in the "Bertrand Castle" as kids like to call it. It wasn't exactly a castle, but it certainly fit the bill. We had about fifteen acres of private land surrounding our house, if you could call it a house. I always presumed that if you had more than the standard three to four rooms, it no longer qualified. And since ours sat at twenty-two rooms, with a ballroom, various dining areas, stables... I'd never called it a house in my mind.

By the time I arrived home, my hair was a mess. I'd been running my fingers through it over and over because I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. Not only did I have to come home to my dead father and significant inheritance of companies, but I had to deal with an asshole I already couldn't stand. An idiot that had also stolen my girl. And everyone knew about it too. Except, she wasn't my girl. I'd made damn sure of that seven years ago and now she would never be mine again.

I supposed it was for the better of all parties involved. At least, that's what I told myself as I stormed into my house and slammed our large wooden door loud enough to bring attention to myself. My mother always kept the house in pristine shape, which required the help of the various staff. We had housekeepers, chefs, gardeners; although she prided herself on her garden. I'd also been raised with an education in cultivating plants and flowers, something Bellamy both made fun of and admired deeply when we were young. Because I needed a distraction, I went to my room with my bags in tow and began to change into shorts and a white t-shirt.

Once out in the yard, I looked over my mother's labyrinth garden. It was basically the only sibling I'd ever had since my parents couldn't conceive after I was born, and my mother literally threw herself into creating a maze she could get lost in. It was where she went when she was angry with my father, when she needed some space from me in my angry teen years, or even just to weep over the other children she never had. It was also where she and my father would hide away for private lunches or dinners when they wanted to rekindle their youthful affections. But what I remembered most about the labyrinth were my times with Bellamy.

Bellamy Charmant. The love of my life.

She and I had a complicated history, one I'd sowed and reaped on the day I'd left. Seeing her awoke a part of me that I'd always carried, but tried my best to ignore.

We were always sweethearts. Little loves since elementary school, that forged into pretend enemies in our juvenile years, only to become high school sweethearts before I'd run away. She was my everything. The voice I couldn't get enough of, yet simultaneously ignored when she was right. The face I saw in my dreams and the same one I worried about in my nightmares. My life had been forged with hers until I dismantled myself from Faluk and all the things I didn't really want to leave behind.

So why did I leave? Why would I purposely banish myself from these ties?

It's an odd tale. One that doesn't make much sense, but has shaken me to my core since it happened.

Towards the end of our senior year, our high school art teacher took the entire class to a Renaissance festival visiting near Faluk. She forced us all to dress in theme for the time period, and despite the heat that spring, all the girls in our grade had rented ball gowns from local shops and wore hooped skirts through narrow streets and gardens. But not my Bellamy. No, she opted to dress as a peasant girl, and while most of her female classmates judged her for it, their opinions were rooted in jealousy. She looked lovely and feminine, the thinner layers of her burgundy dress hugging her soft curves perfectly. Even the wreath of flowers on her head made her look ethereal.

I'd donned the traditional leggings of Italian Renaissance men and prided myself in the way it fit my muscular legs and showed off my crotch. I'd worn a cup to avoid seeming indecent, but Bellamy still picked on me.

"You just want the girls to know what they're missing, huh?" She winked.

"It's not like you've seen it," I teased back. Though I wished she had already. I was dying to be with her like that.

Her delicate jaw dropped and she bit her lower lip. Approaching me, she leaned in close and whispered against my lips. "Maybe I will soon." And then she walked away, unraveling my resolve in the process.

Like the trained puppy that I was, I followed my girl through all the booths and shows. We'd seen a man that ate swords, an artist that drew a caricature of us both, and even witnessed men racing with women on their backs. It was insanity. While Bellamy's favorite part was the jewelry shopping and antique book selection, mine was the food. I'd had lamb and gigantic turkey legs all day, and I'd even tried themed delicacies. She and I had enjoyed the day so much, we didn't mind the heat or the crowds. We simply enjoyed being with each other. It was as easy as breathing, and in some ways, it had always been.

On our way out, we passed a final booth that was covered with purple curtains with golden beading. There was a sign outside that read "Hear Your Fortune, Test The Fates!" and Bellamy couldn't resist. She turned back to me and grabbed my hands, squeezing them in excitement. "Oh, Ollie! I have to go in. I've always wanted to do this."

I didn't think anything of it and handed her the cash immediately.

"No, you have to come too!"

I tugged back. "I'm not into knowing my future, Bells. You go, enjoy it."

She knew me well enough not to push, handed me her bag of used books she couldn't resist, and ran in whispering, "Spoil sport."

I'd hung around the booth for what felt like forever. What could a phony like her possibly come up with? It took too long. But then Bellamy came out with a big smile on her face that spread all the way to the corners of her eyes. She was so elated from whatever she'd heard that she couldn't contain it and marched straight towards me, grabbed my face with her dainty hands and tugged me down for a wet kiss. I felt it all over my body, but especially in my groin that was constrained by the cup. It was so intense I had to pull back and stop her before I embarrassed myself with massive wood at the Renaissance festival.

"Bells, not that I'm turned off by this enthusiasm, but what's going on?"

"Nothing." She snickered. "I just love you, Ollie."

Looking down into the various blues of her eyes, I saw my future there. I didn't need some phony fortune teller to tell me that Bellamy was it for me. I kissed her once more, pressing her full, perfect lips against mine and replied against them too. "I love you, Bellamy. Always."

It was yet another perfect moment in our times together. Or at least it was until a wrinkled, freckly hand snaked its way through the curtain and

parted the fabric. Out from behind it came a woman in her late forties, with jet black hair and electric green eyes. Her face was youthful, much younger looking than the hands attached to her body appeared. She was beautiful in an exotic way, I suppose. Still, something in those eyes left me unsettled. They were staring at me, assessing everything beneath the surface. My heart rate accelerated.

“You,” she mumbled.

Both Bellamy and I looked at her unsure of who she was addressing.

“You,” she demanded, much louder this time with one crooked finger pointed at me. Her blood red nail polish was a sharp contrast to her pale skin.

“Me?” I hooked my thumb into my chest and all she did was nod.

“No, thank you.” I chuckled.

“Yes, you must. It is vital. I will not charge.”

In truth, I wasn’t worried about paying. I had enough money to live multiple lifetimes. I just didn’t want to waste any of those lifetimes on frivolous imaginings.

“Ollie go in, it’s so cool. Don’t be such a chicken.”

“I’m not afraid of it, babe. I just don’t believe it.” I tried whispering it to her so the woman wouldn’t hear us. Somehow she’d managed to.

“That is because you don’t know any better, boy.”

Her voice was croaky and taunting.

“Fine.” I threw my hands up in the air. “I’ll do it just to spite you.”

The woman’s mouth curved up on one side in a wicked smirk before she turned back into her little tent. I followed her in with a grunt. Once inside, I noticed a small round table filled with tarot cards and the cliché crystal ball. I half expected her to use one of them on me, but she scooped up her cards and put the pile on the corner table in the back, and covered the ball with a sheer cloth. Indicating with her hand, she said, “Sit, boy.”

“I’m not a boy,” I argued, already annoyed by her.

“You are. What you will hear in this room will determine whether you will actually become a man. You see, making choices,” she leaned closer. “The hard choices life proposes, that is what makes a man. Not the wealth in your family’s pocket or the stunning girl on your arm.”

I tried to hide my surprise that she knew my family was rich. It could’ve been a lucky guess, yet it still set goose bumps along my skin. The whole

setting around her did. It felt like an eerie, surreal joke. Except no one was laughing, especially not me.

“I have three things to tell you, Oliver Bertrand. None of them are about you. But if you do not heed my warnings, you will suffer the most.”

“How do you know-”

She cut me off, “Your name?” Tilting her head back, she howled with laughter. “I know everything, Oliver. I know that your mother wanted another child, and your labor stole that chance from her. I can tell you that your father wishes you would take interest in his career. I even know that you are on top of the world right now and that I am about to snatch that pedestal from beneath your feet. You will get into all the schools you wanted and succeed in all you do, but only if you listen. Are you listening now?”

I swallowed, but didn’t answer.

“Good. Now pay attention.”

“What’s your name?” I demanded.

“It is Fezia. Now let us begin...”

Reaching across the table, she grabbed my hands and looked at my palms. Just as abruptly, she let them go and closed her eyes to deliver her message.

“The girl that you love is not yours to keep. If you try to keep her for yourself, she will suffer, but so will you. Bellamy will be the prom queen of your class. She will also be the valedictorian. But the most important thing I will tell you is that her mother will die shortly after. She will die suddenly, cruelly even. Withering away like a rose does, the dry petals crumbling because life is cruel and beautiful things cannot last forever. Finally, if you do see these signs and finally, believe me, Oliver Bertrand, you must take this final warning. If you try to stay with Bellamy even after all these events occur, and trust me they will, then she will die too. She will be stolen from you and buried beneath the ground so deep, not even her soul will leave this place. You must leave her.” She opened her eyes and snatched my hands with aggression, her nails clawing into my wrists. “YOU MUST LEAVE HER!” She shrieked and tilted her head back in laughter. I ran the hell out of there with her cackle trailing behind me.

Bellamy was outside and I almost knocked her over into the dirt road.

“Ollie, what is it?” Her hand touched my sweat covered cheek.

“Nothing, that witch is crazy. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

And we did. We barely made it to the bus back to campus where I spent the whole drive obsessing over what I'd just heard.

At first, I thought it was bullshit. It certainly sounded like it. Like some made up story.

But then it all started happening.

A week before our final school dance, Bellamy got the news that she was named our valedictorian and nominated for prom queen. I took it as a coincidence, but then she won prom queen. And it terrified me. I kept hearing Fezia's voice and replayed the fortune in my sleep. I'd never been superstitious, but she knew about me and she'd already predicted two things for Bellamy. But for her, I tried to enjoy the dance. I tried feigning content at the end of our studies and the next steps of our lives.

My parents were away on business that night and I took Bellamy home with me, partially because I didn't want to be apart from her knowing I may actually have to leave her forever, and partially because I was terrified if I left her alone something would happen to her. I selfishly wanted to hold her forever, to cage her like a bird or a prize and keep her coveted and safe. But that night I grew too quiet and since she knew me better than anyone, she noticed. She kept coaxing me to say things, to explain why I wasn't as jovial as she was. Why I didn't float on happiness the way she was that night. She was breathing elation, bubbly and effervescent in her golden gown. We were at a great point in our lives. In fact, our lives were still ahead of us, and Bellamy simply didn't understand that I suddenly felt like mine was stuck. Like there was a train coming at me and I couldn't move from the tracks.

After the dance, we walked around in my mother's garden. My mother's garden was Bellamy's favorite part of my house besides our library. She enjoyed the occasional luxury of working outside with my mother and the flowers because she said the product was always beautiful and predictable. "What you reap is what you sow" she'd say. In particular, she loved my mother's dark, crimson roses that bloomed every spring.

On this night, she was so happy, she began to run into the maze and yelled, "Chase me, Ollie! I bet you won't find me even though you claim to know this maze by heart!"

"Bellamy!" I called after her, but it was no use, she was gone. So I began to track her. She'd plucked a rose from the walls of flowers and left petals along the floor to lead or mislead me. I wasn't sure. The only thing I

could do was follow her voice. She would say things like “Over here, Ollie,” or “I’m all alone, Ollie. I need your kiss, Ollie.”

The further into the maze she got, the more provocative her calls became. My name a sinful moan on her lips. “Oliver, I’m undoing my corset. I need your help.”

So I started walking faster. It was pure torture imagining her as she undressed, the moonlight kissing her skin in places I’d felt but hadn’t seen. We came from traditional families, and I was always taught never to lead in that respect, but to follow a girl’s path. I never felt like I had to hold back with her, and yet I respected her too much to push. It didn’t matter that I was a teenager desperate for that kind of touch. Besides, Bellamy and I had messed around in other ways. That night, though, the breathy tone of her voice, the way she said my name over and over, like a song she couldn’t stop singing, it pushed me over the edge.

I finally found her in the center of the labyrinth, her body strewn across the bench. The straps of her dress were slipping from her shoulders thanks to her now loosened corset. She had one petal left in her hand and she pressed it against her plump lips that matched its color. Her hand pulled away from her mouth and let the petal fall down to the ground.

“You found me, now what are you going to do?”

I want to say that I resisted. That I told her to stop and considered my next actions because it wouldn’t be fair to take this from her, to give it to me, if I knew I’d be leaving her soon. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I trod toward her and joined her on the bench, trying my best not to touch her. She looked so exquisite. Her dress made her look like a fallen star or comet, leaving her creamy skin to glow against it. Her red mouth, a color of lust and passion taunted me, begging me to touch her and reveal all the loveliness beneath her gown.

Bellamy made the first move, in part because I wouldn’t, and in part, because I had always let her. She touched my cheek and stroked my jaw before leaning forward to kiss it. I couldn’t see myself, but I imagined her lip rouge leaving trails all over my skin as she continued to kiss her way down my neck before returning to my lips. I grabbed her wrist, her hand still on my face and begged, “Bellamy, stop.”

Her neck craned back to meet my eyes. Even in the darkness, the blue shone brightly, almost hauntingly. “Don’t you want this with me? I want

this with you. I have for so long, Ollie.” Her hand trailed down my chest all the way to my belt.

“Of course I do, but we don’t have to.”

“Yes,” she leaned closer, her lips lingering over mine. “We do. I don’t want anything else but you.”

And then she kissed me, differently than she ever had. This wasn’t a teenage kiss that was filled with puppy-love or tenderness. This was a kiss exploding with want, need, passion and desperation. This was a kiss that wordlessly told me I was the one she wanted forever, and she was going to make sure I understood that. Except forever wasn’t promised. Not anymore.

I couldn’t resist. I couldn’t avoid kissing her. I loved her. I was devoted to her. She was my best friend, but also the woman I pictured by my side as I grew old. She was the girl I hoped would become the mother of my children, my partner in all things. Was it selfish of me to give into her? Yes. Of course, it was. But I was human. I was hers and she was mine, and that night I didn’t want to entertain the notion that one day, that might not be.

I gripped her face in both my hands and kissed her back. I melded my mouth to hers and tethered my soul so that it would intertwine with hers even for just one evening. I demanded that fate leave us be for a while, even just a few hours. We laid in the middle of the labyrinth and made love slowly, in a devoted, inexperienced worshiping of one another’s bodies. I didn’t rush our first time, savoring every touch, kiss, and look as if I were burning them into my memory. Her sounds would be the cruel song I’d replay when I was lonely and the “I love you’s” we whispered over and over would haunt me for years. They were no truer words that night, for I loved her then, before, and after. I loved her as if it were breathing. I just couldn’t keep her. That night left me black and blue inside. The adoration I had for her bruised my heart, my insides, even the moment felt tender because being inside her and having her all around me, it destroyed my resolve. I knew she was forever a part of me, and that I’d cursed her to always keep a part of me within herself. It was as though I’d drowned us both, pulling our intertwined bodies and hearts under the waves of Faluk and into the abyss of love. The fortune I didn’t want to believe told me that my only choice was to let her go and sink with the riptide.

After being outside for hours, I headed in for a shower and some catching up. I spent the afternoon secluded in my father's library. Where my mother had her garden to retreat to, my father had his books. It was where he went to work from home, where he would occasionally smoke a cigar, and where he went to figure out any problem he had. Part of me was mimicking his habit of finding solutions amongst pages of stories and words. I wasn't having much luck.

Every time I made progress through my father's papers, I'd grow distracted and pace through the various dark wood shelves. I'd think of Bellamy and Preston's hand around her waist. I'd imagine them together, the way we were, and grow infuriated. At one point I threw files all over the floor and spent half an hour picking them up. At least I could pick up that mess. The one in my head and heart wasn't so simple.

As I finally got the papers in order, I heard a tap on the glass door that sealed me in the library. It squeaked open despite that I hadn't invited anyone in. With my back still turned, I imagined it was one of our staff. "I'd like to be alone, please," I grumbled.

"Hmm," she hummed. "I bet you would. Haven't you been alone long enough?"

I turned from my father's desk and caught sight of her over my shoulder. She looked lovely in her yellow sundress and blue shawl. I both loved and hated her outfit. It fit her perfectly, both against her body that I could still feel all around me and in her personality. Bellamy was the epitome of a girly-girl and loved dressing up. But a nasty thought rose within me. She was likely wearing it for him. After all, they'd met for the day and she used to love dressing up for me. A sour taste tinged my tongue and I turned back to stare at the paperwork.

"You were always predictable," she said, walking closer and eventually sitting back in my father's over-sized desk chair.

I looked at her and noticed the ring on her finger, one that wasn't mine. Bellamy's eyes followed mine to her hand before she covered it with her other one. Was she ashamed for me or for herself? My mother's announcement that she was engaged was unfortunate, to say the least. But now it killed me, even more, to know it belonged to that beast of a man. Tilting her head, she said, "I knew I'd find you here. You love brooding...even more so now it seems. It's why everyone thinks you're an asshole."

Typical Bellamy. No filter and definitely not with me.

“That’s not why people think I’m an asshole and you know it,” I smirked bitterly.

“No,” she shook her head, passing her fingers along her brow. “I suppose it isn’t,” she paused and spun the chair towards the large window facing the woods. “Were you going to tell me you were home, Ollie?”

“No.”

“Even though you’re apparently moving back? Even though you’re staying?”

I didn’t answer immediately. Instead, I made my way towards the bench that framed the window. Sitting down, I asked, “What makes you think that?”

“Preston told me,” she stated.

I didn’t even like the sound of his name against her lips. If I stayed here, I’d have to see him kiss that mouth, and worse. He would marry her and give her children. He would be her life in a way I couldn’t.

She continued, looking straight at me and ignoring my silence. “He could tell there was something in the way we looked at each other. I told him our families were old friends.”

The fact that she’d lied to him and made our history seem minimal felt like a knife twisting in my gut. But what did I expect with the way I’d hurt her? I had no right.

“Did he buy it?”

“For now. Preston has a way of finding these things out. So it might be better if it comes from you before he hears it from the gossip mill. You should have seen the faces at The Barnacle, all pressed up against the glass. They were like moths to a flame.”

I allowed myself to look at her. To really appreciate the vision of her before me. Although seven years had passed, Bellamy had only grown more beautiful. The teenage roundness was gone from her face, leaving only feminine lines and curves. Her lips seemed fuller now, tempting me to no relief. And her eyes, my favorite part of her, they carried a new weight to them. A sadness veiled by the facade of happiness she’d grown accustomed to. I’d put that there. Me and the shitty life that evil woman had predicted. I’d grown too quiet, even for me. I spit out the first thing that came to my mind.

“How’s your dad?”

She shrugged. "Oh you know... he's okay I guess. He kind of became the town loony. After he resigned as Mayor, no one has ever looked at him the same way. They think he's crazy. Did your mother tell you he's started to create things? Like an inventor, except none of his contraptions work. At least they keep his mind occupied, which is about all I can ask for. He didn't become an alcoholic or a drug addict. He didn't kill himself after my mother died. It could have been far worse. He managed to pay for my school before he went eccentric on us all. I think he just needs a steady job again, something that can challenge him and keep him busy. Preston thinks I should get him help, send him to some sort of rehab. I don't like the idea of him being away from me, though..."

My mother had indeed told me about Mr. Charmant. It wasn't enough that Bellamy's mother had died suddenly. Life had to go and take her father's mind too. It squeezed my heart knowing that I'd abandoned her during all of this, but there wasn't much else I could do.

"Are you okay, Ollie?" She interrupted my thoughts and walked over to me. Joining me on the bench, Bellamy's fingers caressed mine for a moment. "I'm really sorry about your father. I know it was sudden, but he had faith in you to continue all this. He trusted you with everything and knew what you were capable of. People will come around to loving you again once you show them his work matters to you."

"They hate me, Bellamy." I looked up at her and found tears in her eyes. "Do you hate me too?"

She didn't answer, instead leaning her chin on my shoulder. I wanted to turn and kiss her but resisted. "I've never hated you, Oliver. I don't understand, but I've never hated you. I can't. That would be like hating myself because you're the other half of my soul."

She rose and started to walk away. My words came out fast and accusatory. "Then how can you marry another man?"

Stopping in the doorway, she turned over her shoulder and said, "Because he loves me and he's been here this whole time. You haven't. But that doesn't mean I don't love you or that I hate you."

And with that, she left.

It had been three days since I'd last seen her. She'd walked out of my house and I watched through the window, like a prisoner of my own home and heart. I tried my best to stay busy and avoid deep conversation with anyone in town, but it was impossible. They all approached me and offered their condolences for my father's passing. They'd loved him and respected him. And in his honor, they were forced to treat me with respect they likely didn't feel. I was appreciative regardless. This town loved my father. I carried his name, but I had big shoes to fill and a hell of a legacy to compete with. And he'd trusted me with it.

By the fourth day I'd trapped myself in his main office downtown. It helped to be away from everyone so that I could go through all his papers and make initial decisions. My solitude didn't last long, though. Preston continually popped by the office with more papers for me to sign. It started to feel like he was coming up with any excuse to spy on me or disturb me. I got the most uneasy sensation around him, too. And it wasn't just because he had Bellamy's heart. I hated him for it, but I was able to look past that when it came to my father's work. But there was more to it as though he had something up his sleeve. It finally came to fruition that afternoon.

He'd entered my office without knocking and sauntered his way into the chair before what was now my desk. I almost killed him when he placed his feet up on the corner of the table.

"Can I help you?" I growled without making eye contact. If I looked at him, I'd surely see his snide smirk curling his lips and then I'd really have to kill him.

"You know." He pointed at me. "I've been thinking..."

"Have you now? I wasn't sure you were capable."

It was the first time I'd snapped back at him so blatantly, but at this point I wanted him gone. I'd taken care of all the red tape, and still, he lingered around the offices. What was his motive?

Preston merely chuckled at my sly response.

"Bellamy said you were old family friends...but I asked around and apparently there's a large part of the story missing." He leaned forward, dropping his feet with a thud to the tile floor. "I saw how you two looked at each other. You're the one...the one that left and broke her to pieces. She barely spoke of you when I came around, like you were her little dirty secret, and I suppose you are still. She hadn't mentioned you...ever. Does that kill you?"

I finally looked at him, at the tall, devilishly handsome man before me. He was a looker, with blond hair and blue eyes that could easily captivate a woman. But on the inside he was ugly. A monster. I still couldn't believe Bellamy was with this guy. It didn't make sense.

"Hah!" he yelled. "It does...it kills you and there's nothing you can do about it. You see," he leaned back again. "She's mine now. The whole town is mine. I've got them all eating out of the palm of my hand."

"Is that so?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Didn't you hear? I'm going to be Mayor. I'm going to change everything here and make sure you get run out like the dog you are. You should be used to it by now, being forced out that is."

This prick was something else. I wondered if my mother knew how evil he was. If she understood that he'd grown close to my father only to destroy all his life's work. Before I could hesitate, I slipped my hand into my pocket and removed my phone. Walking towards the window, I hid it from him and dialed Bellamy's number, muting her so she could hear it all. Maybe I would be run out of town. Maybe everyone hated me still for breaking their golden girl's heart, but I could at least save her from ending up with this power-hungry jerk. I'd ruined her life once. I couldn't let her ruin it with him too. I didn't have to win her, but he couldn't steal her.

The clock started running on the call and I knew she had answered.

"Is that why you're with Bellamy? To get in good graces with her father and her so that you can get elected?"

"Obviously," he boasted. "Everyone loved that man before he went absolutely insane. Of course, you weren't here for that either. You haven't been here for any of it, but that's okay," he pointed at himself. "Cause I have been. I've been here for all of it, scooping up Bellamy's problems so I could use them to my benefit."

I turned back to face him, my phone in my back pocket so she could continue hearing it.

"What makes you think you'll get away with this? That I'll let you walk away without destroying you and your plan?"

"I have my ways."

"It won't work. People here love her. They love her father even though he's falling apart."

"They're terrified of him and his wild antics. I'm gonna have her crazy father sent to an asylum and I'm going to take over her estate and bring it

back to life. She's let it fall apart in the years after her fragile mother died. So now it'll be mine and so will she. And once she's given me what I want, I can get rid of her anytime. After I'm the mayor and this town trusts me, I could get away with murder if I wanted to."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself, Preston."

"I am. I always get what I want."

Just as he said that Bellamy walked into the office in complete silence. I had one last chance to prove to her that I loved her, even if I couldn't have her.

"I'm going to tell her everything, you know. I may have hurt her and destroyed what we had, but she means everything to me. There isn't a person in this world that I loved or still love more than Bellamy."

"She won't believe you", he said, cockiness oozing from his smile. "You left, you broke her heart, and I became the prince in her eyes the second I moved into town. She loves me and she will never believe the words a man tells her because he was the boy that once broke her world apart."

"Preston, you're fired. Get the fuck out of here as quickly as you possibly can, before it's me that ends up destroying you."

As soon as the words left my mouth, he rose and crowded in on me. My arm pulled back and I punched him in the jaw so hard, he fell back onto the chair that flipped behind him. Lying on the floor with blood dripping from his full lower lip, Preston's eyes rolled back and caught sight of Bellamy witnessing the entire exchange.

I stared down at him, gritting my teeth.

"If I ever see you again, you better make sure you're walking in the opposite direction of me. In fact, I'm not leaving, ever...so you better make arrangements to get far away from here, because I'll be here till the day I die and I won't tolerate an asshole tarnishing this place."

A week passed. A week of silence, of longing, of worry. I questioned my actions. I regretted acting so rashly, but not the end result. All this doubt stemmed from the fact that I hadn't heard from Bellamy. How was she? Did Preston's abrupt departure leave her heartbroken? Or did it provide relief she didn't know she needed?

Silence. It was all I heard. Silence in my mind, but even in my surroundings. There were only the occasional whispers of my mother's staff. And even my mother, who supported my decision once I explained the circumstances, had been all too quiet. The woman that raised me was so often filled with opinions that it felt unnatural for such quiet. Of course, I'd gone to her for advice. I'd asked her what I should do when it came to Bellamy. Her only answer was "You have to figure this one out on your own. You'll know when it's right."

My mother's words weren't exactly helpful. And I wasn't the patient type, which is why after a week, I grew stir crazy in my father's offices and mother's house. I found myself working outside again, surrounded by thorny red roses and tangling vines. The garden had been filled with pages of memories, and somehow it still soothed me even though I felt Bellamy everywhere. Perhaps that is why I always returned to its presence. The smell of jasmine and minty leaves calmed my mind. The feel of the pebbles beneath my feet accompanied by their sound was a comforting sound. All of it was so familiar and in a way, it was the only place I ever truly felt at home. I could jump into working outside and all would be right, even if only for a few hours.

Sometimes while I sat in the garden, I would imagine hearing Bellamy sing the way she used to in our younger years. She would hum at first as she laid on a blanket in the center. But those hums turned into beautiful melodies that floated up into the air and decorated the sky. Her songs would even coax my parents out to join us occasionally. Today, when I felt especially alone and lost, I swore I heard her on the outer layers of the maze. It became so real, her voice so vivid in my mind and ears, that I began walking my way out to find her.

I'd been through this maze hundreds of times throughout my childhood and teen years. I knew my way in and out in my sleep, in the dark, even with my eyes closed. But that day, following her voice that was clearly in my mind, I got lost. It was as though the maze had changed, or maybe it was me that had changed. I was a different person than I had been before. I came home anew, with struggles and challenges that needed to be faced. I was now the person my father entrusted his company to, and the man that had broken her heart twice. And still, her voice taunted me. It lead me in one direction before I would suddenly hear it on the other side. Back and

forth, round and round I went, until the voice grew silent and I dropped to the floor against the maze wall.

My skin was damp with sweat, my shirt clinging to the muscles beneath it. I felt exhausted from running in circles. But more so, I felt exhausted from the last two weeks. Finding out my father had died, leaving all those responsibilities...it was too much. Adding the fact that Bellamy was almost lost to me, to that evil heathen no less, was horrible. She was still lost to me. Just because Preston was gone didn't mean she was mine. Did it?

If anything, I presume she hated me more.

A faint hum sounded in the corner and my head shot up from my forearms to spot its source.

Turning around one of the walls was the love of my life. The most beautiful girl I'd ever seen and would ever know. She was stunning to behold, her face and body a sight of perfection. But more than anything her heart of gold, the same one I'd shattered, shone through and manifested itself all around her. In her smile that hypnotized me. In her kisses that I could still taste. In the way she approached me silently and knelt beside me.

She folded her blue dress under her and curled up next to me. And all I could do was look at her. Take her in. Burn her into my mind that was convinced she was part of my imagination.

"You're here?" I whispered.

She nodded, rolling her lips together. I knew Bellamy enough to see that she wanted to speak. The corners of her eyes were watery and her mouth couldn't sit still. Her dimples would appear and disappear as she opened and closed her mouth. What words were about to come out? Would they relieve me of the emptiness I'd felt since I'd let her go? Or would they merely tear apart what was left of my soul?

Without realizing it, I'd been holding a rose in my hands. The same one I was working on cutting when I heard her voice. I must have torn it off the wall by accident. My fingertips were covered in drops of dried blood, now browning against the fine fingerprint lines on each finger. I'd always loved working with the roses because they were stunning and Bellamy loved them. But they were also thorny and fickle, pinching the hell out of you and reminding you that all good things come with a price. That life was beautiful but complicated. Much like people.

"It looks different since a week ago. Your mother's been busy," she said, touching the rose with gentle caresses. Her touch lingered there for a

moment before she dragged her hand across mine. It continued skirting across the skin of my forearm and eventually to my face.

She'd always touched my face like this. Like I was the same size as her, even though I was much larger. Like a princess loving a beast or creature that didn't think he deserved love too. I was her rough and she was my gentle, and together we created complimentary pieces of one another.

"Yeah," I nodded, unsure how to act. My actions felt clumsy whenever she was around. Was it more hurtful to be friendly and closer to her? Or was cruel to be distant? I never knew what measure of familiarity was more difficult for her to swallow, especially now that I'd driven her fiancé out of town. But Bellamy, she never faltered. Everything was natural to her. She took her hand from my face and grabbed my hand. Curling her delicate fingers around my thick knuckles, she squeezed me.

She flipped my hand over in hers to observe my palm, tracing the lines and smiling to herself. Something about the way her lips curved left me both confused and wanting. I wanted to kiss her, to tell her I'd been a fool for hurting her and ever letting her go. But there was something knowing there in the corner of her mouth.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, looking up at me with her sapphire eyes.

"Anything," I swallowed, my mouth feeling dry. I still couldn't believe she was there.

"Why did you leave? And tell me the truth this time."

I shook my head, "I've told you—"

"Lies...you've told me lies, Ollie. I want the real reason. I need to know and I think I deserve it. Don't you?"

Her voice was so soft it didn't even disturb the breeze, but it held such command. It always had. She'd been the captain of my heart.

"Bellamy," I tried to pull away and she gripped my hand harder, tethering herself to me in what felt like a memory. It was the same way so many years ago in this garden.

"Tell me," she whispered, her breathy words coming out like a beg.

"It's complicated. I left because I didn't want to hurt you."

"Your leaving did hurt me. It destroyed me. And the fact that you're worried about me, even now, enough to tell Preston to get the hell out of here, that tells me there's more to your story, love."

Love. We hadn't called each other that since we were teenagers. Did she still consider me hers the way I still considered her mine?

My eyes shot back to hers in silent questioning. "Yes, Ollie. You're still the only one I've loved. So can you please tell me the truth? Can we put this heartache to rest."

Bellamy squeezed my hand, coaxing me to spill all my truths. But what would she think once she knew?

"What if it makes the heartache worse, Bells?"

She offered me a teary eyed smile. "It won't." She shook her head. "Because I know what's in your heart and trust you did all you could. It's why I'm here beside you now...after all this time."

I sighed, releasing all my emotion in a heavy breath. Looking away like a coward, I began.

"Remember the festival we went to in high school, the one with all the gypsies?"

"The fortunes," she laughed cynically. "I knew it. I always suspected it was something from that day because you always felt distant after that. You didn't hold me the same way, you made me feel like I was fragile. Like you'd already left."

I nodded, shame coloring my cheeks and heating my skin.

"Well, what did she say to you? It had to be monumental for you to have done something this drastic. To have stolen time from us both."

"She seemed full of it at first, saying little things you'd expect to hear from a typical palm reading. I didn't invest in it." I shook my head. "But then she said things that were too personal. She told me that I would get into all the schools I'd applied to, that I would be successful in anything I set out to accomplish. She said that you were the love of my life and always would be, but that you would win prom queen and valedictorian, and after that your mother would become very ill and die just after graduation, and that if I stayed with you, you would perish too, right in front of my eyes, and follow in her path, wilting like a rose. The first thing could've been something she'd looked up with your grades and popularity, but your mother did get sick and passed away horribly, and it just freaked me out. I decided that if I had to become the villain in your life in order for you to survive, I would. No matter how ridiculous it seemed. So...I became an asshole. I was cruel to you, not being there when I should have been, just so you could live."

Bellamy remained silent for some time before she stood up and paced back and forth between the wall of roses my mother's labyrinth created. It felt like ages before she actually spoke.

"You're a damn fool, Ollie."

Not what I expected. At least she hadn't run off.

"You let us lose all this time because you thought you'd lose me."

Bellamy's hand waved in the air with aggravation. "Don't you think that was my choice too? Don't you realize she told me things too? She told all of us lies. It just so happens she got some of it right. I already knew my mother was sick. I wasn't supposed to, she hid it from all of us, including my poor father. But I'd found the paperwork for her doctor appointments in her dresser drawers. I'd seen her sick in the bathroom when she thought I wasn't home. The women at that festival came back only one other time, do you know when that was?"

I frowned, completely at a loss for words.

"She came back for my mother's funeral. And she came back with a teenage boy that was beautiful and kind. He picked up the pieces because you weren't around, but there was always something odd about the coincidence of it all. About the way he swooped in and became my knight in shining armor...something that didn't feel right deep in my heart."

"What do you mean?"

"Ollie, it was Preston," she whispered. "At that festival I thought she told me I'd end up marrying you. But over the years I reconsidered her words. She said 'you will marry a beautiful boy. One that makes you feel alive every day. He will be with you after a great tragedy and will make you happy despite that tragic loss.' I assumed she was talking about my mother and you. But this week, after seeing you come back and overhearing Preston's cruel words...I realized she'd just twisted what I wanted to hear. His mother had done her research and knew who I was. She knew I could help them succeed in town with my father's connections and basically drove away the only person standing in their way. You. She got rid of you and played with your sweetheart. After my mother died she managed to get a job at your father's offices and Preston shadowed him for years. He confessed it all to me just before storming out yesterday. I told him if he ever came back, I'd gut him and mount him on my wall like the animal he is."

"You're kidding me," I stood, my muscles tightening beneath my skin.

It all made sense despite the absurdity of it. But after seeing the kind of man Preston was, I had no doubt that Fezia, if that was even her real name, was his mother. She was a cruel witch that had played us all. A slew of anger and frustration rushed through me. My blood boiled beneath my skin, but Bellamy's next words soothed me.

"I wish I was kidding. I wish there was a better use of all this time we've wasted. There are so many things I wish were different, but what I wish for most is that we can make it better now. That you don't leave me again. That.." she paused. "That you stop pretending we aren't meant to be."

"Bellamy..." I approached her and gripped her shoulders tighter than I should have. "You have to know, I did this because I was terrified I'd be your demise. I gave you up because I didn't want to lose you."

"You've never lost me, idiot. I've been here waiting for you to come to your senses. To be mine again..."

"I've always been yours," I said, just before I pressed my mouth against hers and finally felt like I was home.

We kissed for minutes, hours, mere moments that felt infinite. I kissed her for those seven years that I'd left her, for all the kisses and touches I couldn't give her and desperately wanted. My mouth begged hers for forgiveness and repentance, her tears racing against my skin washed away my regret. Framing her cheek with my hand, I pulled her closer and dared the fates to tear us apart again. Fear ran through my veins, testing my resolve and worry that I could still ruin her. But the trembling of my hand and racing pulse didn't stop me. Bellamy felt my palm and fingers shaking against her jaw where I held her. Cupping her hand over mine, she pulled her lips away just enough to whisper against my own.

"Ollie, it's okay. Nothing will happen to me. I promise. You and I are going to have a very long life together. That is what's meant to be. That is what's in our fates. I've seen it. I've dreamt it for years. I've wanted nothing more for years."

My teeth clenched as I reflected on all the hurt I'd brought upon her. Upon us both. I'd fallen for a foolish trick, a curse placed on both our hearts. It was too much and my eyes welled with tears I couldn't blink back.

I had loved this girl for my entire life. I had hurt that same girl because I loved her, and now she was a woman that was willing to take me back into her arms as if no time or pain had passed between us. I did not deserve her. I tugged Bellamy closer to my mouth with desperation and placed my kiss on her forehead. She leaned in further and laid her head just beneath my chin and against my chest. My heart beat faster as if it knew she was closer to it, soothing it.

“This,” she whispered, so softly, I barely heard her. “This is my favorite song. How I’ve missed it.”

Bellamy was listening to my heartbeat, just as she had so many years ago for our first time in the garden. She’d laid next to me, her half dressed limbs tangled with my own on the ground. The stars were above us and the earth below, the wind blowing the soft gardenia and rose scents against our exposed skin. The only sounds playing around us were her breathing peacefully against my chest, and our heartbeats beating in rhythm with one another.

As if she knew what I was thinking, she began to unbutton my shirt and kiss my chest directly over my heart. The feel of her lips on my skin ignited my blood and I leaned back to look at her, to truly understand her intentions. I hadn’t been with anyone since her, no one would measure up. No one deserved that place in my memory, history, or heart like she did. Bellamy’s eyes smiled at me. It had been a long seven years, but I couldn’t.

“I was never with Preston. It didn’t feel right, ever.”

I jerked back. “How did you convince him to wait? He was such an asshole.”

She hesitated, looking away for a moment before meeting my eyes with worry in hers. “I told him I’d had a really bad experience with someone. It was the only way.”

Again, I’d been painted as the villain of Faluk and the monster in her heart. Except this time I had no regrets, not if it meant Bellamy had faith that I’d come back. That I’d make her my queen and earn my rightful place beside her as her king. I’d take care of her, my mother, and her father. I’d make Faluk my home again and earn the heart of its people just as I’d made hers mine again.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, begging for forgiveness once again.

“I’m not.”

It was all she said before she continued unbuttoning my shirt, trailing her fingers down my chest and lightly touching the scattering of hair covering my muscles. I followed her lead, as always, and peeled her jacket off with care. We kissed again, barely breathing in between each touch. I squeezed her as if she were going to disappear right before my eyes. Part of me was still terrified and my stomach was flipping because I had missed her so desperately and was so genuinely afraid to lose her again. But she was right. She had faith, and her trust in our destiny lead me to lay her on the ground, surrounded by rose walls and the whistling wind. I made love to Bellamy for the first time in seven years, in the exact place and way I had that first time. I sealed our bodies together, melded my mouth with hers, and made certain that she knew she'd only ever been mine. Afterward, we laid there wrapped in one another, my body still inside hers and our lips still dancing with one another's. We were those same young lovers we'd been so long ago. With Bellamy in my arms and her exoneration in my heart, I was at peace. I couldn't rewrite the last seven years. I couldn't erase them or our pain, but I could make certain that our futures were written together and nothing would tear us apart. I made the decision in that moment that we would have no beginning and no end. We would simply have each other, always.

The End.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Alba grew up in Hialeah, Fl. with her Cuban grandparents and holds a BA in English Literature and an MA in Educational Leadership from the University of Central Florida. From an early age, she always wanted to become a writer and began seriously working towards that goal during her first year at home with her infant.

Before becoming a stay-at-home mom, Stephanie taught high school English and Literature. Though she misses her “kids”, writing is her passion and all of her stories resonate with her experiences in some way. They are works of fiction, but just as they connect with her, she hopes they also connect with her readers.

She continues to live in Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. with her husband and son. When she isn't writing, Stephanie is reading, at Disney, or spending time with her family.

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perception

Madalyn Beck

A TALE OF blurred lines and two unlikely souls who find a way to make peace with their beasts—after all, life is hard, but death is harder.

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THE QUICK, SHARP stabs of a knife causes me to cry out into the darkness of my room. It's just another night of another person's death, but it doesn't kill me. I groan under the unbearable sensation as my arms twist around my middle to be sure that I am still in one piece.

A lady in white stands in the corner of my room as she holds to her stomach the way I hold to mine. She's a ghost, hovering and transparent, but I can make out her features, the blood staining her dress around her stomach.

We cry together. I try to keep my groans and tears silent. I try to hold it together as best as I can, but the continued stabs make it more and more difficult.

The door to my room swings open so fast that it slams back against the wall. My mother's eyes are wide with alarm. Her stringy light brown hair hangs limp. Her bony frame doesn't even fill half the doorway, but her screams fill the house.

"Witch! Get out of my house!" She stumbles towards me, the liquor making her legs wobble more than usual. A bony hand grips my forearm, tugging me upwards. I try to yank my arm from her grasp, but it tightens each time I fall with another stabbing pain from an unseen blade. My mother doesn't let up. She unlocks the front door and shoves me out into the night. "Stay out of here, witch!" She tosses my backpack out the door just before she slams it behind me.

The fact that my mother just kicked me out doesn't register. Not yet. I fall to my hands and knees, bent over with the tearing in my gut. The lady in white must have followed me out. She stands not ten feet away, still crying, but they are whimpers now.

The pain is leaving.

No. The pain is still there.

She is leaving.

She's dying.

* * *

The air is cold as I run from my mother's screams. The sky is clear of clouds and the stars whisper on the wind, the light calling for me, and I desperately want to go. But fear keeps my feet pounding the pavement. I push forward into the gated lot.

"George. Beverly. Ryan. Emma." I greet the headstones until I arrive at my spot. There is one headstone that settles me more than the rest. One that I chat with openly. One who is buried alone.

"Reece."

Gravity sucks me to the ground, and I shrug off my backpack to rest against the headstone. "You're lucky you're dead."

Yeah, I'm blunt.

The silence spills over me, and I welcome it. My muscles begin to relax as the crickets gently chirp into the night.

"My mom was screaming again. At least she didn't tell me how she hates me this time. How she can't stand to look at me. How she wishes she never had me." My arms wrap around my middle, holding in the ache. This time it's not from the murdered woman who came to me in the night. It's from my mother. It's from loneliness. As much as I hate her, a part of me still loves her. A part that still hopes one day she'll love me.

Her cries, ear-splitting and shrill, ripped me apart as I tried to pull myself together on the front porch of the house. But I couldn't stay for long. One of the neighbors lights turned on, and I knew I had to get out of there. Their judgement rests with my mother's shrieks of terror.

Now her feelings of me have rubbed off.

Now I'm disgusted with myself.

"I envy you, Reece no-middle-name Winters."

My fingers trace the grooves in the stone. He would be a year older than me if he were still alive, but he died last year.

My mother moved us to this small town a couple months ago in hopes that a smaller town meant fewer dead visiting in the night. But they always find me.

I stare at this headstone, at his name, and wonder what caused his death. What took him down in the prime of his life? Did he have all the experiences a teenager should have?

An image of him erupts in vivid color behind my eyes, and I pull out my sketchbook to recreate his features. His rich eyes and soft face with crinkles around the eyes.

“I wonder if we would have been friends if you were still here. Would you have taken me away from my mother? Maybe we could have left town together.”

My fingers twitch with another image appearing in the clouds of my imagination, and I flip to another page, this time drawing his full form. He would have been tall, but not too tall. Strong, but not buff. He would have been smart, too, but some part of me feels he would have tried to hide that. Like he didn’t want people to know.

“Too cool for school, bro,” the words are out of my mouth in a tone of voice that is deeper than my own, and followed by a bubbling laugh.

Did I really just say that?

My thoughts wander away with the possibilities of a young boy in a grave. A new thought spills into my mind, and I hate that I think it, but it’s already there. Before I know it, the sketch appears on the page as my fingers work at the image.

His father, stern and strong, but much larger than Reece, holds firm to a gun. Reece grips the gun, too, their faces both distressed and struggling. And the barrel is pointed at Reece’s chest.

My heart lurches and my ribs scream in piercing agony. I buckle over, the pencil and sketchbook falling from my lap as a burning sensation plunges into my chest. My vision blurs and moves from black to white. Black. White. Numbness to blinding pain.

Then something cold presses over my chest, right where the ache ebbs. Right near my heart. The sensation slows to a pulsing, then stops all together. I’m catching my breath as I stare at this hand. It’s the hand of a boy. And it’s on my boob.

I shove up, throwing the hand from me and look at this person invading my space.

But it’s not just any person.

It’s Reece.

* * *

I know his face because I was just drawing those features. Messy hair, dark eyes, full lips. Those eyes stand out the most, crinkled with the slightest hint of laugh lines waiting to shine.

He offers a soft, hesitant smile, but I can't return it.

I blink. Another dead person visiting me in the night isn't strange. This dead person, who I've visited often over the last few months, however, has never shown himself.

I open my eyes, but he's still here, smiling.

I blink again.

He's still here, only this time he looks concerned. "I didn't mean to scare you, but you shouldn't have been doing that."

I shake my head. "Doing what?" I ask, not understanding what's happening. He's a ghost, but he doesn't look like one. He's not fluorescent or transparent. He's not white or clear or floating like others I've seen. Reece stands before me looking exactly as I pictured.

Whole. Human. Real.

With raised full eyebrows, he angles his head to the spot next to me asking if he can sit. When I nod, he moves over and relaxes against his headstone. "You really don't know what you were doing?"

I shake my head, because I still can't believe this is happening. It has to be a dream. I pinch my arm, but I flinch at the soft flare of pain. He laughs while I rub at it. When I finally look at him again, he asks, "Do you believe this is real now?"

"What is *this*?" I croak, the words tight in my throat. This has never happened before. Did I just summon a dead person?

"You called me out."

"No, I didn't." No. *Nononono*.

He rolls his eyes before looking directly at me and speaking again. "Maybe not with words, but you were seeking me out, and, well," Reece waves his hands over his body and smiles.

I close my eyes trying to remember what happened, trying to think through how I could have possibly made a ghost come crawling out of his grave to say hello. I can't understand it. Dead people usually find me.

I turn to look at him again, and he's clearly beautiful. He's sitting here as clear as day, just the way I am. "You don't look like a ghost."

He laughs. A loud, full-bellied, rich laugh. I instantly smile at him.

Note to self: make this boy laugh forever.

Except he's a ghost. And I'm alive. And we don't have forever.

Shaking his head, Reece says, "You mean like a ghost from the movies?" He holds out his arms first, flipping them around to inspect them, then pats down his chest. "No. I guess I don't."

I don't mention how I've seen plenty of dead people. His eyes lower for a moment, but when he looks at me again he says, "I'm Reece, by the way. Not that you didn't know that already." He pats the headstone we lean against.

"Jadyn," I whisper back.

My eyes trace the lines of his face so I can remember every last detail. His gaze does the same. I shift away from him and ask, "Will you remember me? Tomorrow?"

Do ghosts remember anything when they walk among the living? I've never known. I've never been brave enough to ask. I've never wanted to actually interact with any of the dead who've come into my room only to wake me with the memories of their deaths. But there's something about Reece. Something comforting and easy.

His eyes move back up to mine, and whispers, "I don't know. I've never been out of my grave before. Not quite sure how this works."

I don't want anyone to forget me. It's a bad habit. Selfish. Malicious. I don't care though. If they can't love me or like me, I'll make sure they remember me. But the fact that he might not remember a damn thing from this night is a sore reality that I might have to swallow.

Reece looks up to the stars and sighs. I watch him while he's preoccupied, my eyes following the path of his long legs and lean torso. He would have made a handsome man in the coming years. The girls would have been all over him. I would have been all over him.

My face heats with the realization that I find Reece, a ghost, attractive.

He smirks and he tilts his head until our eyes meet. "Like what you see?"

My eyes widen. "How do you do that?" I squeak in an accusatory voice.

"Do what?"

My pointer finger juts out at him with both defensiveness and curiosity. "You know what. You say I called you out, but it was only questions in my head. Now you somehow know that I find you attractive. Do you hear

thoughts or something?” I’m hysterical and flustered. Never has a guy made me feel like this before.

I hate him for it.

But I also love the feeling of being found out. It puts it all out there.

His smirk transforms into a full blown grin. “Honestly, you somehow brought me out with your thoughts. I don’t know how, but I didn’t hear you. And what exactly were your thoughts on my attractiveness?” He lifts his arms behind his head and stretches out as he asks the question.

My face gets hotter — and more than likely redder from his response — if that’s even possible.

Shoving up from the ground, I face him. Height advantage. Space advantage. “That’s all,” I say with a firm voice even as my heart tries to pound out of my chest and run back out of this cemetery. “You’re attractive. The end.”

Reece stands. It’s fast. One second he’s on the ground, and the next, he’s in front of me with my face to his neck. He waits until I look up into his dark eyes that are rich like chocolate.

“So why am I here, Jadyn?”

That’s a question I think both of us want answered.

* * *

After a stare down of epic proportions, Reece looks out towards the little town, and mutters how it hasn’t changed a bit. I turn to his headstone and confirm that he’s only been dead for a year. I wonder if he realizes this. Do dead people have a way to keep track of time?

“Do you want to go somewhere?”

He squints in my direction as if remembering that I’m here. With a deep breath, he states, “Why don’t we start with you explaining why you come here.” His points behind me, but I don’t have to turn to know where he means.

I shrug, but his gaze doesn’t waver. Reece is patient, waiting for me to answer verbally with something more than nonchalance.

“I guess I just feel like this is where I should be, away from the constant screaming and hitting.” His eyes narrow with concern, but he lets me

continue as the words rush out of me. “I mean, what’s the point anymore if my own mother can’t stand the sight of me? What’s the point of trying to do nice things for her only to be shunned to my room or out the door? I cook meals and clean the house. I do laundry, mostly because if I don’t she will only do hers. But I help and I try so damn hard, but all she gives me are her screams.” I take a moment before adding in a whisper, “She calls me a witch.”

Reece says nothing and makes no move towards me as a tear drips onto my cheek. I wipe it away quickly with the sleeve of my shirt, not wanting to feel anything in regards to my mother, but I do. I just want her to love me like she did when I was little. Before the dead started visiting.

Reece shoves his hands into his jean pockets as one black sneaker scuffs at the ground. “Some people have stories that they keep buried inside. We don’t know how much it affects them until it eats them alive.” He looks down at his grave.

“You think that’s my mom?”

He nods, but his mind is elsewhere, his stormy gaze locked on his final resting place. His thoughts are in the past as memories play over his features. Angry to hurt. Hurt to depressed. Depressed to angry. And the cycle repeats.

What happened to Reece?

My eyes land on my sketchbook to see the drawing I was working on before he burst from god-knows-where and startled the ever-living-hell out of me. I know he was shot, but I don’t know why.

He follows my gaze and tenses. Reece looks to me, his gaze burning the side of my face. My chest tightens with unease.

“How did you know?”

“Know what?” I whisper, still nervous to face his expression. My eyes remain locked on the sketch as my chest begins to burn all over again. I press a hand to the spot, rubbing.

Before I know it, Reece stands in front of me, forcing my gaze towards him. His hand hovers over mine, over my chest.

“This,” he whispers. His breath brushes against my skin like a cool breeze. It only drills in the fact that he is no longer made of warmth and blood and life.

My gaze lifts to his, and there is no judgement in his eyes. Nothing but curiosity. “I felt it.”

His brows furrow and he looks at the spot on my chest. My face heats once more as he inspects me there. The concern evident in the lines furrowing his forehead.

"I'm okay," I tell him.

He nods, but doesn't move his eyes from my chest. I push past him, needing space from his prying eyes, and pick up the sketchbook. I close it with a loud slap, and Reece visibly relaxes as I stuff it back into my bag.

Not yet ready to leave this place that has been my safe haven, I settle against the headstone and lean my head back to stare up at the night sky. I lift my phone out of my bag and check the time. It's 1:15 in the morning and my mother hasn't called. She never does, but that doesn't keep me from hoping one night she just might be concerned when I don't return.

"You're shivering." My arms cross in protest - and for warmth - and I shake my head, but before I know it Reece is next to me. "I wish I could keep you warm." His fingers drift over my arms without touching, and it only causes me to shiver more. "Then maybe I could keep you."

Those words startle me, and I lift my head to face him only to suck in a startled breath when I realize how close he is to me. Our faces mere inches apart and breathing in each other's air.

I lick my lips.

His gaze lowers to my mouth. "You can't kiss me," he whispers.

"I wasn't going to," I reply just as softly.

"Good."

Not going to lie, that hurt a bit, but I keep the sting of his words from my expression. He squints like he knows, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction even though I want to taste him, to feel him, to shove those words down his throat.

He continues to watch me while I stare into the dark, away from the small town lights behind us. "You should go home, Jadyn."

"Why?" My voice is sharp, and I instantly wince at the sound of it, but he isn't bothered.

"Because it's cold out, and if you stay, you could get sick."

"Like anyone would care."

We sit in silence staring at what few stars we can see. "I would," he mutters under his breath, but I hear him.

It's that one simple fact, those two words, that lift me. Even if he's just a ghost. It's the fact that someone in this moment cares enough for my safety

and well-being. A breath shudders from my lips with the cold that I'm only now willing to admit to, as I rub at my arms and nod, accepting his words. I shove up from the ground, pull my bag onto my shoulders, and step down the path towards the exit of the cemetery.

I glance over my shoulder expecting to see Reece, but he isn't walking with me. He still sits at his headstone, his gaze attached to me.

"Aren't you coming?" I holler.

His lips begin to lift, and in a split second, he's in front of me. "For as long as you want me."

* * *

Reece stops in front of the coffee shop on the corner a few more blocks away from my house. Pivoting on my heel, I stand next to him while he stares inside. The store is closed. All the lights are off, the chairs pressed into the tables, the floor completely clean. There's nothing going on in the town tonight. The world is silent except for our soft breaths.

I adjust my focus on the glass and stare at Reece's reflection. His lips are puckered in distaste and his eyes seem to shimmer under the street lamp hanging above us. Startled, I turn to him. "Are you okay?"

Reece nods, but doesn't face me. His lips press tight and his brows draw together as his nose flares. "This is where it started," he speaks softly, but his voice is filled with such ire that it shocks me.

He was shot — I remember feeling the burning penetration in my chest — but in a coffee shop? I'm missing something. He faces me and flashes a smile that curls at the edges with malice.

"No, I didn't die here, but I may as well have." He takes one last look around the store interior before stalking into the street. The roads are silent in the small town, so I let him go. His aggravation is apparent in the way his hands clench and unclench before reaching up and tugging at his hair. He stops on the yellow line separating the lanes when he peers up to the sky and lets loose a scream so dense with rage that it causes every hair on my body to stand on end.

One hand instinctively moves over my heart, pressing on the spot, while the other covers my mouth to drown out any groans of pain. His agony is

ripping through me in sweltering streaks of blinding pain as light flashes behind my eyes. White. Black. White. I don't want to interfere with his moment even though the sensation in my chest grows with his frustration.

Reece's throat strains as he puts everything he has into his torment. Tears leak onto his cheek, but he doesn't brush them away.

I want to run to him. To wrap my arms around him and tell him that everything will be okay. But I don't know that. I don't know what happened to Reece. All I know is that he calls to me like a shot of brilliance in my darkest night, and I'd do anything to get to him. Except that the pain of his death keeps me buckled over as his screams pierce the night like he's letting everyone who will hear him know that he's still hurting.

A light flicks on in a building across the street. I don't think. I move. Forcing my body upright, I rush into the road and slam into Reece, the force so hard that it causes him to stammer backwards until he stumbles with me falling on top of him. His eyes are wide in alarm or concern or both. My eyes are glued to the light in the building above us, waiting for someone to come out and see what is going on.

"What-"

"Shh!" I slam my hand over Reece's mouth as we wait. His lips lift into a grin under my palm as he relaxes beneath me. His hands come up around my waist, and my body coils tighter with apprehension at the contact.

My gaze gradually descends to his, and I drop my hand away revealing Reece's breathtaking smile. "What did you do?" He questions as wonder dances in his eyes.

Confused, I climb off of him to get out of his dizzying grasp. "I saved us from getting yelled at or someone calling the cops, Mister Screams in the Street Like a Damn Drama Queen," I whisper-hiss and punch him in the arm.

He grins, rubbing where I just punched him like he's the happiest guy in the world. "They can't hear me."

I shake my head while pointing up to the building. "But that light came on-"

"Probably someone getting a glass of water or waking from a bad dream." It's plausible, but his cries ripped through the night vividly. He must notice the confusion on my face because he adds in a tone that has lost all the humor from just a moment ago, "They can't hear the dead, Jadyn."

His statement chills me at the thought of how lonely the dead must feel. But it also makes me consider that maybe he wasn't screaming because of his anguish. Maybe he was screaming with a desire to be heard. I ask him, but he shifts his gaze from me to the empty coffee shop, and I know it's true.

Reece shoves off the ground and readjusts his shirt. "We're not here for me." His hair sticks in every direction, but he doesn't seem to care. He only runs his hand through it once more before facing me. "Just tell me. What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You shouldn't be able to touch me let alone slam into me like that."

"I didn't do anything. I thought someone heard you, so I ran." My shoulders rise to my ears in confusion.

He watches me for a minute, as if deciding whether to believe me or not, but then points down the street. "This way?"

I nod and lead the way to my house. It's only a few more blocks, and we arrive sooner than I would have hoped. The lights are off. My mother is more than likely passed out on the couch again next to a bottle of some liquor. I pray it's not vodka. She's the worst with vodka.

We enter the dark house as quietly as possible. I close the door once Reece enters and lock it. Three locks. The door handle, the deadbolt, and the chain. My mother lies on her stomach on the couch. The television that continues to play softly is our only source of light. I move to cover her with the blanket draped over the back of the couch. When I reach for the remote, a shimmer catches my eye. On the floor is an empty bottle of vodka.

Perfect.

I turn off the television and wave for Reece to follow me down the hall to my bedroom. We sneak softly to the corner and turn down the hall when a floorboard creaks. We pause, eyes wide with alarm, and wait to hear if my mother wakes. After a moment of groans from the couch, my mother falls silent once more.

I push Reece down the hall this time, my fear heightening at the possibility of my mother waking to see me returned to her house, in her life. Angling to follow Reece into my room, my foot accidentally kicks into the door causing it to slam against the wall. We freeze again. This time, my mother wakes.

“Who’s there?” She rolls off the couch with a thud as her voice, thick with sleep, sounds from the other room. We listen to her struggle before she makes her way to the hall. A part of me wants to help her, but another part, a stronger and more fearful part, keeps me frozen in place.

She makes her way to the entrance of the hall and flicks on the light. We both cringe, but her eyes narrow as she tries to focus. Through the onslaught of the light and alcohol it takes her a minute, but I hear her soft voice when she recognizes me. “Jadyn?”

Swallowing thickly, I reply. “Yeah, mom. It’s me.”

Her whole body begins to shake as she looks around. “Where is he?” She whispers.

I tense and look at Reece. His brows are drawn together in confusion, but he moves into the hall behind me, showing himself, but my mother doesn’t see him.

“Where is he? Did he follow you?” She rushes to the door, checking, double checking, triple checking the locks. When she’s satisfied, she inches the curtain aside just enough to peek out at the streets. She asks me again, “Where is he?”

Sighing, I question, “Where is who, mom?”

“You know who! Where is he?” She starts to scream as her breathing gets louder and more ragged with the panic gripping her. “Where is he? You little bitch. You brought him here, didn’t you? Didn’t you?” Her hand flies out before I have a chance to react. The slap is loud and jarring. My ear rings from the contact of her palm on the side of my face. When our eyes meet, there is no apology in her gaze. Only fear and loathing.

* * *

“What did I ever do to you?” I shout at her.

She fists her hair and turns away while growling, “You’re just like him.”

Realization slams into me. My father. Of course she wants to be sure I didn’t bring him here. He’s a witch, just like me. I slam my bedroom door shut and stare at Reece.

He lazes on my bed. It’s a good view, but it starts to blur with the onslaught of tears. My throat starts to close up with sickness. Sickness that

she is my mother. Sickness of the incident Reece just witnessed.

My eyes brim with tears and my chest tightens and my face stings. Reece pats the spot next to him, and I crawl over. He lifts an arm, and I nestle into his cold form pulling a blanket up around us. It's oddly peaceful as we listen to my mom throw things and fumble through the house. My body flinches every time an object flies down the hall at my door, but she never enters.

Reece places a hand against my cheek so feather soft that I barely notice it at first. He traces over my cheekbone, down my nose, to my chin, and sweeps back up along my jaw. It's comforting and eases the prickling sensation from my mother's hand.

"Was your mom like this?" I whisper as my mother finally quiets down, possibly passing out again.

"My ma. Yeah, she was beautiful."

My lips tip up when he calls his mom, ma. "I wasn't asking how she looked." My pointer finger pokes into his side.

He chuckles as his hand leaves my face to grip my wrist. He guides me until my hand rests on his heart. "No, my ma wasn't like this."

Reece pushes himself against my headboard and spreads his legs, tugging me between them until my back presses against his chest with his arms wrapping around my waist. It's an intimate position, but it's what I need.

"Tell me something," I whisper, desperate to think of anything other than the aching hole in my chest.

One of his hands drifts to my hair, threading through the long strands. "What do you want to hear?"

"A story," I reply, but my heart pleads *take me with you when you go*.

Reece rests his chin atop my head, and we sit in silence for a while. His steady breaths lull me with the rise and fall of his chest. My eyes are heavy with sleep when he finally speaks.

"There once was a boy who had everything he ever dreamed. The perfect family, the popular friends, the most attractive girl in school."

I snort, but he continues.

"Life was good. He felt invincible. Until one evening when it all changed. The boy had just ducked into a coffee shop as a drizzle of rain turned into a downpour. The boy found a table and pulled out his phone to play games until the weather let up.

A man sat across from the boy at the same table. The boy eyed the stranger curiously, but the man didn't leave. Instead he smiled. Little did the boy know that he was grinning with greed.

"Do I know you?" the boy questioned.

The man's smile grew as he replied, "Today you will."

An hour later, the boy left the shop with wide eyes of shock and disbelief. His stomach turned at the idea of his once perfect life crumbling to pieces. He ran to the back of the building and vomited on the pavement, his throat burning with stomach acid and lies. It had to be lies. The man's words echoed in the boy's head.

Son.

Mine.

You are.

That was the first and last time the boy ever saw his real father. The man — *his father* — left with a smile on his face like the only thing he had to do was tell the boy that the life he's been living has all been a ruse. A sham. That he wasn't supposed to be a part of that family in the first place.

Once his stomach was emptied of everything he had left, he ran home. His body was covered in sweat and rain, and his skin was pale as he ran through the door.

She was the only one home — thank God. His mother looked at him and instantly rushed to his side seeing that he was distraught. Or maybe she just thought he was ill. He felt ill, but not with the flu or a cold.

The boy was sick with the possibility that everything in his life would change. The fear the he may possibly be pulled in two directions. The fear of this new father pulling him away from his family. His body trembled, but he stood tall and resolute as the words spilled from his lips.

Father.

Mine.

He is.

After telling his mother what happened at the coffee shop, he looked for her to tell him that it wasn't true, that this stranger was playing some sort of sick joke. But her face went pale and her eyes grew as they filled with fear and tears.

Her expression told the truth far better than her lips ever could.

"Please, mom," the boy pleaded. "Tell me it's not true," he continued, begging her for his life back.

But she only mumbled, “I’m so sorry, Reece.” Her shaking hand reached out to him, but he shirked it off.

How could she do this to their family? How could she have lied for sixteen years?

His mother told him everything. About how her and her husband had been struggling to get pregnant. The marriage was strained and they took nights away from each other because the pain was unbearable with the knowledge that they couldn’t make a baby together. Maybe that meant that they, as a couple, didn’t work.

She was depressed and went to a bar after work one day only to notice a handsome man sit next to her. He flirted, and she was flattered. One drink led to another which led to a bed that wasn’t her own.

A couple months later, she discovered that she was pregnant. The husband was ecstatic with the news. Things were finally turning around. How could she take a child away from the man she loved, even if it wasn’t his?”

Reece’s breath hitches in his throat. This story is about him. I listen as he struggles, wanting to face him, wanting to comfort him, but knowing he needs to get it all out. With what little I can do, I run my hands over his arms that remain wrapped around my middle until my hands reach his, then intertwine our fingers. He nods against my back like he understands the gesture before taking another shaky breath and continuing.

“I felt lost. I was pissed at her for wanting to keep me a secret. I hated myself for playing the part of the good son, though I suppose over the years I became far less good. I started drinking and smoking. Cigarettes and pot. I graffitied a wall downtown. Stupid shit. If I wasn’t drunk, I was high, if I wasn’t high, I was drunk. Then other times the ache in my chest was so bad that I did both.

I miss that, you know. The high feeling. The buzzing sensation of being invincible even when you know you’re not. I didn’t want to think about it all, so I didn’t. I did everything I could to bury it. Days went to months, and months to years, and everything was going fine. Until it didn’t.

One night when I was drunk and high, my emotions were all over the place. My dad, my fake dad, I don’t even know what to call him... He was pissed about my downward spiral. He said he was ashamed of me. That unless I pulled my shit together, I was no son of his.

I snapped.

I told him I wasn't his son.

He slapped me.

Only then did my ma speak up. Only then did she tell him that it was true. That she cheated on him all those years ago. That she was sorry. Ma was in tears, begging for us to stop fighting, but he wouldn't because I wouldn't let him.

He stepped away and I rushed at him. I punched him. All the anger and disappointment I felt for my ma, I threw into him. We fought hard. I was no match for him.

The pain was unbearable. He was so goddamn powerful. I couldn't handle it. I collapsed to the floor struggling to breathe. My lip was cut open and one of my legs screamed when I put weight on it after falling backwards over the table and taking a chair down with me. He started to walk away, but I didn't want it to end here.

I was so drunk and high, and I grabbed his gun from the cabinet. I tried to hold it to my head, but he snatched my wrist, trying to stop me.

The worst part of the whole thing was that he wanted to save me. He loved me and he didn't want to see me go. But I wasn't his. I wasn't anyone's. I was a lie in an otherwise happy family.

"Let go, Reece!"

But I refused. I twisted and tugged harder on the gun, trying to get him to release his hold.

"Dammit, son, let go!"

It was that moment. He called me son like I was his; like even though he knew I wasn't blood, I was his family. There was no doubt or hesitation in him. We were family.

But it was too late. The gun went off. For a moment, we froze, unsure of who got hit. If anyone got hit.

Then I felt it. It was almost peaceful. The blackness was coming for me. The silence. The nothing. A place where I could just be, without being a lie. A burden. A shame. I felt like the black spot in their life. The one blemish in their world.

"No. *No*, Reece." My dad told ma to call an ambulance, and turned back to me. "You hang in there, son. Stay with me."

We were a happy family once, and I let all those good moments blur because one secret was kept from me. One secret that hid my ma's wrongdoing. But it also kept me with their family, with the life they had

built, and I overlooked that. It's something I wish I would have realized sooner. Even though I wasn't their family by blood, I was completely their son and brother because they loved me and I loved them."

Reece's arms shake as they hold me to him, snaked around my waist. I want him to know that it's okay that he made a mistake. That we're all human, and that's what we do. We mess up. We do stupid things. We fight. And sometimes we fight because we want someone else to hate us as much as we hate ourselves. But the words are stuck in my throat. His body trembles and his breath against my neck is hot and wet.

I can't take it anymore. I turn in his arms, and grip his face as my fingers swipe at the tears that fall to his cheeks. His chocolate eyes focus on me, and his arms tighten around my waist once more, holding us together.

Only now do I realize that I'm straddling him. This position is far more intimate, but we don't move to adjust.

I lick my lips.

His gaze lowers to my mouth. "You can't kiss me," he whispers.

"I wasn't going to," I reply just as softly.

He nods, but his focus remains on my parting lips as he pushes forward. He's sitting up straighter, causing my back to arch. Our bodies press together and electricity hums beneath my skin as his fingers trace over my back.

"We're not all good, and we're not all bad. We are all both beauty and beast. It's something I wish I would have realized sooner. Maybe I'd still be around." Reece brushes a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Maybe I could have been around for you."

"You're already here."

His gaze drops and his long lashes fan across his cheekbones. "No, I'm not." When his eyes meet mine, they are intense with longing. "Not the way I want to be. Not warm. Not whole. Not real."

My breath stutters as I reply, "You're real to me."

"If one person believes, does that make it true?"

"Maybe if the right person believes."

His throat bobs as he swallows his emotions, struggling with the longing he feels for his family, his life, and the life he could have had. "Jadyn, don't give up on your family the way I did with mine."

* * *

The sun hurts my eyes as it shines through the blinds. After a few failed attempts, my fingers finally grasp the string to flip them and coat the room in shadow. Even though the light is dimmed, my mind is awake. I push up until my back hits the headboard, and I rub at the sleep in my eyes, trying to collect my thoughts.

My memories are fuzzy from last night. My eyes ache with the lack of sleep. Then it hits me.

Reece.

He's nowhere to be found. Fumbling with the cord again, the sun fills the room, blinding me for a moment before my vision focuses. He's not outside. I push over my book stacks on the floor next to the bed so I can get a view of the underside, but he's not there either. I run to the closet and throw the door open, but only my clothes greet me with a soft sway from my frantic movements.

My bedroom door opens and I startle, the squeak of the hinge catching me off-guard. Reece stands in the doorway, his brows cinched in worry, but I shake my head as a smile breaks over my features.

He's here.

He's still here.

And he remembers me.

We didn't know what would happen overnight. This is his first ghostly experience. My first interaction and friendship with a ghost. We didn't know if there were rules and guidelines. If he was only able to walk at night. If a ghost can even survive out of the grave for extended periods of time.

I walk over, relieved and thrilled. My arms wrap around him. He's still solid. He's still real. To me, at least.

His arms slowly wrap around me as he whispers, "I'm still here." I nod, but it does little to ease the fluttering in my stomach. It strikes me just how terrified I am to lose him.

But isn't he already lost?

I don't want to think it. I can't. He's here, and that's all that matters.

Still clutching him, I ask, "Where'd you go?"

“I wanted to check on your mom.” I lift my eyes to him, shocked by his statement, but he shrugs and continues. “It’s nice to be around the living. I want to take it all in. The world. Your world. You.”

My face heats, so I bury my flustered expression into his chest once more and my arms tighten around him.

Reece eyes the mess of my stacked books on the floor, then looks to me for an explanation. My shoulders rise in an embarrassed shrug. I don’t want to admit that I looked for him under there, but the ever-growing smirk tells me that he’s already figured it out.

“You thought I was hiding under your bed?”

“How was I supposed to know where ghosts go in the morning? It’s dark down there.”

He throws his head back in full-bellied laughter. “I’m a ghost, not a vampire.”

Again, I shrug. He can’t fault me, but his warm and tender smile that hits me in all the right places tells me he doesn’t.

I tell Reece to stay in my room while I run to shower and clean up. Grabbing a pair of shorts and a tank top for the day, I leave him. The thought tightens my muscles — a boy alone in my bedroom — and I rush to get ready. Once in the hall, I pad quietly into the bathroom and turn on the water. My mother stays fast asleep while I clean up, tug on my clothes, toss my wet hair into a messy bun, and apply a coat of mascara.

My muscles relax from their tense position when I return to Reece. I plop down on my mattress as he wanders through my room. My chest swells and my lips lift in anticipation as I watch him. He touches the clothes hanging in my closet, not looking at them so much as feeling them. He eyes the bookshelf in my room, full of trinkets and books. He picks a couple out and thumbs through them only to put them back. Then his gaze lands on me.

In one moment, he’s on the other side of the room. In the next, he’s in front of me with his hands placed on the bed on either side of my hips. His face is mere inches from mine. When I finally have the courage to meet his stare, there is a question lurking in his eyes. One he is hesitant to ask.

“What?” I ask, breathy and nervous.

His eyes flit over my face and body. My body heats under his gaze, but I don’t move away from him. If anything, I’m pulled closer. “You’re

beautiful,” he whispers. His breath tickles my neck as his thumb lightly grazes against my thigh in a smooth circular motion. “No pictures?”

“Hmm?” I lift my head, not realizing that I closed my eyes and lost myself for a moment.

He smirks knowingly, and asks again. “No pictures?” He gestures back to my shelves with a quick angling of his face.

I shake my head because what can I say? My mom isn’t exactly my number one fan. While people at school want me or want to be me, no one wants to be friends with me after rumors went around about my mother. Now they aren’t rumors. They are cold, hard facts.

Even her own mom hates her.

Says she’s a witch, just like her father.

She’s evil.

Maybe I am. I’ll be the first to admit that there’s blackness in my veins.

“What are you thinking about?” Reece’s voice draws me back to the present.

“Nothing.”

His hand rests against my cheek, pulling me closer until his breath fans over my face. “Tell me,” he pleads.

It’s hard to look at him and think that he wants to know this one simple thing, and it’s the one thing I don’t want him to know. It’s one thing to witness how my mother reacts to me. It’s another entirely to know that the whole world thinks the same.

“I just don’t have friends.” I shrug again, going for nonchalance.

His eyes soften and the corner of his mouth tips up slightly. “You have me.” He turns away before I can reply. “People are terrible to others. I should know,” he mutters as he sits next to me on the bed.

“I’d never be terrible to you.”

He smiles at my words. “And I’d never be terrible to you.”

“I know.”

My cat stalks into my bedroom, weaving her way around the mess of books scattered over the floor until she gets to my feet. “Morning, Predator.” I lift the fluffy orange tabby into my arms. She meows incessantly, but I squeeze her tight.

“Predator?” Reece chortles.

“Of course. She’s fierce.” I hold her out to him, but she screams, frantically clawing at the air and manages to scratch my arms. I drop her,

shocked by her reaction. The tabby darts out of the room in a flurry of orange and white.

“Who’s there?” My mother’s frightened voice echoes from down the hall.

I turn to Reece, terrified. Before I can run to my window and usher both of us outside and away from this hell hole, he grips my arm. It’s not hard, but it’s not gentle. It’s firm.

“Try.”

One word, one action that I don’t want to follow through on. But for Reece, I’d do just about anything.

* * *

“Mom, no one is coming after you. Calm down.” I try to comfort her with my hands up and palms outward, showing her that I mean no harm.

“Don’t lift those witch hands at me,” my mother snarls in a tone that makes my hands instantly drop to my sides. “I see him waiting in the shadows. Waiting for his chance.”

“Where? Where do you see him?”

Her eyes drag up my body from my toes until they meet my eyes, and she sneers, “Every time I look at you.” I shudder and shake my head, but she continues. My mother’s voice is tormented as she speaks. “He brought them. He always brought them, and you do, too.”

“Who?”

“The monsters.” Her eyes are wild with fear and anger. “He was good, but the monsters got to him. Year after year he changed until he was brutalizing and buried deep.” She shoves her hands folded together between her legs. It takes me a moment to realize she means literally. “Then there was you, and he was gone. It was silent and good and us. You look like him, but it was okay because you were good. You were different.”

“But you started seeing things you shouldn’t see. Then you came home naughty and smiling and ready to torture me. You.” She points her finger as her voice practically growls the last word, her whole body trembling as she steps closer to me. “You gave me that letter with his stench all over it.”

I shake my head, not understanding. “You mean, he sent you a letter in the mail?”

“You brought it in!” She spits hysterically at me.

“I didn’t know! How was I supposed to know when you wouldn’t tell me. What did he do, ma?”

The word slips out. *Ma*.

She freezes. Her body stops shaking. Her lips clamp tightly shut, but I can see the quiver in her chin. A soft light in her eyes. I look to Reece, and his lips lift at the term he uses when he speaks about his own mother. I try again, my voice soft and tender. “What did he do, ma?”

I don’t know if it’s the weight of the word being so different on my tongue or the tenderness of the term. She sobs and falls back into the couch with her head in her hands. There is no screaming. There is no more hatred. I look to Reece for guidance, and he nods to where my mother sits. I hesitantly step towards her. When she doesn’t react, I continue until I’m sitting next to her. Lifting a hand, I place it on her back and rub soft circles over her bony frame. She needs to eat more.

We sit for a while. I’m doing my best to comfort her even though I’m still terrified she’ll scream at any moment. She cries until the tears seem to stop. A few trickle down her face, but the moaning subsides.

“Your father is not a good man.” It’s all she says, wiping the tears from under her eyes before looking at me. She cringes when our eyes meet.

Some people hate how the mirror reflects them. In this moment, I hate how I reflect my father. Never before have I hated the beauty he had given me, even though my mother clearly can’t stand the sight of me. I never hated my looks because somewhere inside I thought it was all I had. But now...

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

I only nod, unsure of what to say or do with that, but I try to understand. “Why is he bad?”

“The monsters changed him,” she whispers as her dull brown eyes pierce into me like knives. She’s looking for the monsters.

“What monsters?”

“The less you know, the better.” She stands suddenly, adding more distance between us.

“But I need to know. If you’re going to hate me because of him, then I should at least know why.”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

I'm pissed. If it doesn't concern me, then why does she hate me this much? Why can she not stand the sight of me? "What did he do." It's a question, but it comes out of me like a demand.

Slowly, she turns. Her clothes hang loosely over her small frame. Her collarbones are rigid, her eyes are large and dark, and her greasy brown hair hangs in clumps, looking darker than normal. In a snarl, a single word spills from her lips. "Leave."

I don't move. I don't want us to back track already. Reece was right, but it can't be over. My mother speaks again, this time louder and more aggressive. "Leave!"

Her anger is clawing its way up again. I don't give her a chance to come at me even though her next words hit with every step I take past her to the door.

"All you'll be is bad. All you'll do is worse."

For once, I do what she asks.

Tugging on a jacket and snatching up my bag by the door, I leave.

And I don't intend to ever come back.

* * *

Reece follows me outside into the bright and warm mid morning summer air. Not even three steps from the house, we hear my mother scream as something crashes inside.

I shove down the sidewalk, defeat in each step. My mother will never open up to me. She'll never tell me what went wrong between her and my father and the monsters she insists ruined him.

We pass kids playing in their front yards and adults doing yard work before the sun gets too high. The beautiful summer day counters my mood, and for some reason it pisses me off more. My feet slam against the pavement as I pick up speed. My chest aches and my eyes burn, but I don't cry. I don't scream. I hold it all in, letting it fester.

A hand snags out of nowhere and grips my upper arm. I try to yank free, but the hand holds firm. My eyes burn the longer I hold back the tears. I don't want to break down in front of anyone in this town.

“Let me go,” I try to sound fierce, but my voice wobbles with the ache splitting up my chest and into my throat.

“Come back to my place, and I’ll make you feel better.”

I know that voice. It’s Connor, a boy from school. He’s with a group of boys I typically flirt with in the halls between classes. It makes me feel good. Better. Wanted. But they aren’t who I want.

I shove into Connor hard, pushing into him, hoping he’ll let me go in order to catch himself, but his hand on my wrist tightens. Connor’s steely eyes glare at me, and he snarls, “What the hell? No wonder your own mom can’t stand you.” The words hurt, but I don’t have a chance to react. Connor shoves me backwards into the road.

I hear a car horn.

Then I feel the hit.

I tumble over pavement, my body burning from the contact.

“I’m so sorry!” A man stumbles off his bicycle. “Are you okay?” His hands move over my body checking for injury, but he doesn’t touch me. Not yet. Not until I give him some recognition. It’s a small gesture, but one I appreciate. My body stings in various spots where my flesh had skid across the pavement leaving bloody scrapes over my knees, hands, and shins from trying to catch myself.

All I can manage is a nod. I’m too afraid to open my mouth, terrified of the sound that will break free. The man helps me up on trembling legs as he apologizes repeatedly about how he tried to get out of the way, but a car was in his only path of escape.

“I’m fine,” I manage to say as I step back onto the sidewalk.

Connor and his friends snicker as they stand by the window of a liquor shop. The owner lingers behind the register while his eyes ping between me and the boys, unsure if he should come out once he finishes with a customer.

Reece glares at boys, but there’s nothing he can do. No one can see him. No one can hear him. In this moment, my anger wins over everything else and it turns on Reece. Why did he have to kill himself? Why couldn’t he be real for me?

I turn away, needing to get some distance from my ever hurting body and breaking heart, but before I make it to the end of the street, the sharp noise of shattering glass echoes behind me.

Everyone's startled gaze pins on Connor and the other boys. The store owner abandons his current customer and rushes out while the boys look dazedly at the empty window space. The owner tells them to stay put as he tugs out his cell phone and calls the police.

Reece walks out of the store and comes next to me, lacing his fingers with my own. A grin tugs at the corners of my mouth as it spreads over my face. The anger boiling blood before completely vanished. "What did you do?" I whisper.

"They could have killed you." Reece's face is as hard as stone. He's livid. "Now hopefully they'll never hurt you again."

"You broke the glass?"

He tugs me into him as we leave the damage behind. "I'd break them if I could." He shrugs like it's not a big deal. Reece doesn't realize that he's the first one who has stood up for me, who has cared for me in a long time.

* * *

We round the corner where the coffee shop resides, and I push through the door. Reece follows as I make my way to the counter. "Just a coffee." I reach into my bag for a couple dollars, pull out a five, and ask Reece, "Do you want something?"

"Who are you talking to?" The boy behind the register looks between me and the space next to me. Empty air. His brows furrow.

No one can see Reece except for me. I shake my head and reply, "Oh. Uh. Just the coffee." I hand him the money. He eyes me warily as he counts out my change. I snatch it out of his hand, grab the cup at the end of the counter, and sit at a table in the back corner. Reece sits across from me, his eyes pinging over the room.

My stomach drops and all the blood drains into my toes. How could I be so insensitive? I shove upwards, the chair falling behind me in my rush to leave this place where Reece first came to realize that his life wasn't what he thought it was; where he met his blood dad for the first and last time.

Reece holds his hand up, his voice low and rich when he tells me it's okay.

After a moment of hesitation, of analyzing his features to know if he's being honest or just putting on a brave face, I reposition my chair. I offer an

apologetic smile to customers who stare at me.

"I'll be right back," I whisper, showing my hands to Reece. He tenses again, but I don't linger. I push the door open to the bathroom and wash the dirt and blood from my hands, knees, and shins as best as I can, then make my way back out to Reece.

The rim of the coffee cup is warm as I run my finger over the circle. Steam billows up from the hot liquid. My eyes drift to Reece who glowers at the coffee shop with such contempt that it causes my skin to prickle. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I ask, "What would you tell him? Your dad?"

His eyes dart to mine. "That I hate him. That I wish he'd never showed up. That I wish he was dead instead of me."

I shake my head, and ask again, "What would you say to your *dad*?"

After a moment of staring at me, he relaxes and exhales the anger once he realizes that I'm not asking about his blood dad. I'm asking about his real dad. The one who had been there for him every day growing up. The one who taught him how to ride a bike and how to drive. The one who went to his sports games and picked him up when he was too drunk or high to get anywhere on his own.

"There's just so much," Reece manages to croak out as he runs his hands through his hair.

Reaching into my bag, I pull out a small recorder. I usually use it to vent about my mother. I call them voice logs. With quick movements, I place a new tape inside and slide it across the table. Today, it's for Reece.

He raises a curious eyebrow at the device before meeting my gaze.

"Tell him," I whisper.

"The living can't hear me, Jadyne."

This time I arch an eyebrow.

"Except you, but you're special." He winks at me. The blush that heats my face is instant, and a smile stretches my lips even as I pucker them to try to control the effect he has on me.

"In the movies and television shows, it works. We can try it, right?"

He wants to argue, but also desperately wants this to work. There is hope at the edge of his fingers as they spread towards the device and grip it. Before he can talk himself out of it, Reece stands and leaves the coffee shop behind an older gentleman.

* * *

A few hours later, we stand outside a ranch style house. After Reece returned to the coffee shop, we tested the recorder and sure enough, his voice recorded. I didn't listen to the message. It wasn't meant for me, but it is meant for someone in this house.

Reece nods that he's ready, and I ring the doorbell. We don't wait long for an older gentleman to come to the door.

"Mister Winters?"

"Yes."

"My name is Jady Andrews. I'm a friend of Reece's. Can I come in?"

His brows furrow with confusion — after all his son died over a year ago — but he opens the door wider, letting me enter. The house is clean and classy, filled with bright colors. It's nothing like my mother's place. He gestures for me to sit on the couch while he sits in an elegant yellow floral chair that contrasts his masculine frame.

I cough, unsure of how to start, but since I'm the one who showed up on his doorstep, the first word is on me. With a deep breath, I begin. "Reece tells me that I have a gift, and I guess I do." Reece nods for me to continue as his father watches with narrowed, skeptical eyes.

"I've been hanging out with Reece for the last day, and gotten to know him pretty well. He, uh... He left you a message."

"My boy has been dead—" but his words stop when he notices the recorder in my hand. He watches me with a furrowed brow for a moment, like he's trying to decide if I'm a crazy person or not. With delicate fingers, he takes the recorder, as if holding it any tighter will make what is happening more real. His eyes lift to mine once more before he presses play, and Reece's voice punctures the silence of the room.

"Dad? Uh, hi. This isn't the way I wanted this to go, but it seems, being dead, I don't get much say in how I reach out to you. But I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, dad." Reece's voice trembles, tears evident in the rattle of his words. "I wish I could take it all back. Everything I s-said and d-did. It was stupid. I was stupid. I want to make it up to you, but I - I can't, dad. I can't, and I'm so damn sorry for that. Just know that I love you. Sarah and ma, too. Tell them that for me, okay?" Reece snuffles on the recording. "Goodbye, dad. Goodbye." Reese whispers before the message ends.

“My boy,” Mr. Winters cries. “My boy,” he folds over clutching tightly to my recorder.

Reece steps next to his dad and rests a hand on his shoulder. “I’m here, dad.” Tears choke his throat as his words go unheard by his father.

“He’s here, Mister Winters.” The man looks up at me, still folded over, still crying, but his eyes hold hope and sorrow. “He’s here.”

Mister Winters nods before handing the recorder back to me. His eyes wander the room, seeking out his son, but he’ll never find him. He’ll never see him the way I do. “I’m sorry, too.” He takes a moment to regain his composure then adds, “I love you, son.”

We sit in silence as Mister Winters struggles to hold himself together. He slaps his hands against his thighs before standing and asks, “Would you like to see Reece’s room?”

A smile breaks out over my face as Reece’s expression turns to shock. “I’d love to.” I mischievously grin at Reece. He shakes his head at me, but a smile tugs at his lips.

“He probably wouldn’t want me to share, but, well, he’s not using it.” I follow Reece’s dad down the hall to a closed door. He opens it and the room is filled, not a single item out of place or thrown away. Losing their son is one thing. Losing every aspect of his life, of who he was, is another. I don’t blame them for hanging on to his things. In fact, I’m giddy that they kept his room just the way Reece left it.

I step into the room and trail my fingers over the dresser, stopping on a box of unopened cigarettes. “That boy and his bad habits.” Reece’s father chortles, but there are still tears in his eyes. His voice trembles as he adds, “Feel free to take anything you’d like. I don’t know how else to thank you for giving me a last goodbye. A proper goodbye. God, that was the worst night of my life.” His voice breaks with the onslaught of more tears. “Scuse me.” Mister Winters leaves to collect himself while I scour Reece’s room.

“So, this was you?” The walls are a storm blue, the bedding matched to the exact shade. There is a small nightstand that I open. Instantly, I want to slam it shut, but I lift the box out and hold it up to Reece with questions in my eyes.

“Uh,” he stammers as his eyes grow even wider. “Yeah, but it’s unopened.”

True. I toss the box of condoms back in the drawer, not saying a word, and not wanting to imagine him with someone else. What the hell is wrong with me? He's dead after all, but for some reason, there is a spark of jealousy in my chest.

Moving to the closet, I snag a large black hoodie that says Ride or Die on the back. I tug it on over my head and lift my hair out. The hoodie hangs mid thigh and hides my shorts. When I look up, Reece's eyes darken from his usual chocolate to nearly black.

"That looks damn good on you." Reece's voice sounds like gravel in his throat, and it only causes my face to heat and my legs to freeze. I turn away from him, ready to leave, but before exiting I snag the pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his dresser.

Mister Winters waits in the living room. "Thank you," I say and gesture to the hoodie.

"Of course." He walks me out of the house, thanking me again. I make it halfway down the driveway when he calls. He holds up a finger as he runs back inside, and a moment later the garage door opens.

Mister Winters walks out with a black motorbike. "Would you want this?"

"What?" The breath is knocked out of my lungs. Is he seriously giving me a motorbike?

"It was Reece's and you look like the type that might," he stops and shrugs before continuing. "He would have wanted you to have it."

Beside me Reece says, "I want you to have it."

"I don't know what to say." I nod and step up to the bike, gripping the handlebars. "Thank you."

"No, Jadyn. Thank you." He folds the keys into my hand, holding tightly and offering a gentle shake to my hand in gratitude, then releases his hold. Reece's father walks back up to the house and the garage door closes a minute later.

I jump on and start it up, the engine sputtering to life. Tugging the helmet off the handlebar and pulling it on, I ask Reece, "You coming?"

He grins as he saunters over, climbing on behind me. His hands grip my hips as he edges as close to me as possible making my body hum with the contact. "I'll go anywhere with you." He wraps his arms around my waist as we take off down the road.

* * *

We make it to the cemetery as the sun begins to set. I park the bike on the gravel drive just inside the gate. We walk past George, Beverly, Ryan, and Emma, over the hill, and down to the other side, to the lone gravestone of Reece no-middle-name Winters. The evening summer air is still too warm for a hoodie, so I reach for the hem at my thighs and tug it over my head.

A weight in the middle pocket reminds me of the pack of cigarettes and the lighter. The idea of seeing Reece the way he was when he was living stirs something hungry inside of me. A beast all too willing to give him what he may crave. I pull the cigarettes and lighter out ready to have my first smoke.

In a quick movement, Reece snatches the pack from my hand and unwraps it. When his eyes meet mine, his lips lift and my heart lifts. We both feel high together. He has peace with his family, and I have peace with him.

We lay in the grass facing opposite directions, our heads next to each other. He hands me a cig from the pack. I lite it and take my very first drag, blowing the smoke out steadily. His eyebrows jump as he watches me.

“What?”

“Most people usually cough their first time.”

Reece snatches the cig from my fingers and inhales, blowing the smoke skywards in a smooth exhale of smoke. He passes it back to me, his face suddenly filled with loss.

It’s my turn to ask. “What?”

“I can’t taste it.”

“Maybe it’s too old.” I toss it down and stomp on it, grinding it into the dirt with the ball of my foot, but Reece remains quiet.

“I couldn’t feel it,” he whispers, his voice hollow.

He doesn’t turn to me, too lost in another life. One that I was never a part of. “Reece,” I call, trying to bring him back. I reach up and run my fingers through his hair. He can feel this, can’t he? He did before. The other night. This morning. Why can’t he feel now?

Come back to me.

“I just want to be able to do those things again.” This time when he looks at me, his dark eyes are hard and determined. “I want to feel your hands in my hair. I know it’s there,” he says as he reaches up to hold my hand, “but the sensation is gone. I want to be able to taste things.” His gaze drops to my lips, and my body heats.

Our faces are upside down, but I tilt my chin up ever so slightly putting my lips in line with his.

Reece notices the movement. He doesn’t look at my eyes though. He remains focused on my mouth, and when my tongue darts out, his chocolate eyes darken. “You shouldn’t kiss me.”

“Why not?” This time I’m embolden to ask. This time, I want to know why he’s scared because for once I’m not.

“I’m not real.” His voice is filled with aggravation as he pushes up, leaving me to lay on the ground. His words are so heavy with honesty that I can’t move for a moment after the weight of them. I can’t breathe. He thinks that he isn’t real, and maybe to most he’s not.

But if he isn’t real, would I be able to see him?

If he isn’t real, would I be able to talk to him?

If he isn’t real, would I be able to touch him? Even if he can’t feel it anymore?

Maybe he can’t feel me, but I can feel him. I sit up, determined to ask him those questions when I spot Reece puttering on my iPhone. “What are you—” I don’t get to finish my question. He cuts me off by hitting a button and slow music begins to play. I know this song. It’s old.

“What a Wonderful World?” I ask.

He stands and holds his hand out to me, his voice low as he asks, “May I have this dance?”

Placing my hand in his, he pulls me up against his body. I wrap my arms over his shoulders and run my fingers over the short hair at the nape of his neck. His hands rest on my waist as we slow dance to the gentle music.

“Jazz?” My grin stretches over my face as he shakes his head, looking to the sky as if it holds all the answers.

“My ma used to listen to it all the time when I was little.” Reece shrugs, but continues, “I never grew out of it. If anything, the older I got, the more I enjoyed it.” I rest my head in the crook of his neck as we slow dance over his grave.

“I’m the monster of my story, Jadyn. I not only ended my life, but I ruined my families lives, too. I get that now. No one else was to blame. It’s all on me. But I’m here now. You can see me and feel me and hear me, and like hell am I going to let that chance pass me up. So don’t give up on yourself.”

He stops our swaying as the song changes. With a finger gently guiding my face upwards, our eyes meet. “I know why you visit the graveyard at night. Promise me you won’t give up.”

“But what if it gets too hard? What if she hates me too much?”

Reece smirks and says, “Still don’t give up.”

“But we could be together.” It’s a terrible thing to think, to say, and I know that, but I’ve never felt better than I do when I’m with him. For once I have someone in my life who cares about me, who doesn’t think I’m a witch. It’s selfish, but I never said I wasn’t.

“I don’t want that for you. Not this. I want you to live. Live for me.”

“Are you saying goodbye?”

He nods for a moment before adding, “I think there’s a reason I can’t feel anymore. You gave me what I’ve been needing this whole time.”

“What?”

“Peace. You gave me a final goodbye to my dad. He heard me one last time. And this time I wasn’t drunk or high. Dead, sure, but,” he shrugs and adds, “He heard me.”

This is it. I don’t want this to be the end. I don’t want this to be goodbye, but I don’t know how to stop it. What did I think would happen? That I’d get to keep him like some ghost pet? That I could date him? Love him? Be with him? There’s no happily-ever-after for a ghost and a girl.

“I have to let you go, Jadyn. I have to let you live.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Reece.” My voice rattles with fear as the idea of losing him slowly settles in my bones.

“Tell you what. You can come back every year on this day, but that’s it. You need to forget me. You need to live a life without me. If you remember me, if you still want to see me, that’s the day you can come back.”

“One day?”

“You’re alive, Jadyn. You have the whole world ahead of you. You can go anywhere, do anything, be whoever you want to be. Of all the things out there, you shouldn’t be trapped with the ghost of a dead boy in a cemetery.”

I want to protest, but he doesn't let me. "I'm dead, Jadyn. In another life, we could have been so much more than this, but I can't hold you back here. You helped me. You helped my dad. So now it's my turn to help you. Don't stay in this shitty town. Don't stay for me or your ma. Go wherever it is you need to go. Help others the way you helped me. You have a gift. Don't waste it."

Tears trek over my cheeks. A part of me deep down that I don't want to let out just yet, knows that he's right. Wrapping my arms tightly around him, I cling to his steady frame. A whole year without him, but I know I'll manage. As much as he may want me to move on, I know I'll never forget him.

He's taught me that not all the dead are strangers in the night looking for someone else to live through their deaths. Without him, I wouldn't have learned that the dead might understand me more than the living. "I love you, Reece." Because I do. Not in any romantic way. If he were alive, that might be a different story, but this is the hand we were dealt. This boy is worth so much love, and he deserves to know that as he goes back to rest.

"Till death do you part?" He smirks, playing it off like he's kidding, but I see the wish in his eyes. The longing for life, for normalcy, for relationships. I'll live for him, but I'll also keep our relationship as alive as he'll let me. Once a year.

My lips tilt upwards at his words, as if we could be married in another life. As if we were meant to be before life got in the way.

"Even then," I whisper, knowing that if there's anyone I want to love even in my grave, it'd be him.

His tongue darts out and licks his lips.

My gaze lowers.

"You shouldn't kiss me," he whispers.

"I don't care."

Digging my fingers into his hair, our lips meet. It's the softest touch, but it's there. It's cold, like kissing an ice cube. Then the cold is gone, the chill melted away leaving nothing but the warm evening summer air and a tingle on my lips.

I pull back and open my eyes. Reece is gone.

He's at peace.

About Madalyn Beck

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A TALE OF a heartbreaker prince and the young sorceress who puts a tragic spell on him—it's no surprise he wants revenge—but first, he must understand what it truly means to be called a monster.

Unlovable
Jessica Bucher

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The Curse

I COULD STILL hear the howling as I sped through the trees, running as fast as my legs could take me. Anger still coursed through my hands, and that biting hatred buzzed under my skin. How could he? Never mind the betrayal or the heartbreak, I was too full of rage to acknowledge them. I trusted him, and he turned on me.

His face flashed through my memory as I ran. The moment that I discovered it was him hiding under that helmet kept replaying in my mind. The moment I cursed him too.

I had no idea what my magic did to him. All I remember was pulling that magic from a place of pulsing rage and sending it straight into his heart. For all I know, it could kill him.

I gasped for air and my legs begged me to stop but I had to keep running. I ran for my safety, but also because it kept my mind from settling too long on the reality at hand. Theo betrayed me. Just last night we were careening the dancefloor together at the masquerade ball. I had never felt closer to anyone in my life. Just last night, we spent the evening in an embrace under the moonlight. He kissed me. He told me he loved me.

I had never been happier.

Then, this morning, I expected to see his smiling face, as I had every day this week. I expected to hear the love in his voice again, see his smile, feel his touch. Instead, there was a dagger at my neck and a rope around my wrists.

That coward couldn't even face me. He hid behind his helmet and ambushed me without saying a word. But when I freed myself from his ties and pulled the helmet from his head—

I faltered. My knees gave out beneath me, and I tumbled to the unforgiving forest floor. A sob escaped as I brushed the broken leaves from my robe and started to trot again. But there wasn't an ounce of energy left to flee. My knees gave out again and I dropped to kneel before a fallen tree. I gasped for breath, and as my heart started to slow, the sob I was holding became a silent cry.

I hated myself for crying over him. But the two images of him, in the moonlight and in the light of day, would not reconcile. My mind would not

accept that those two were the same. And although I hurt him, and I ran from him, it also felt as if I were leaving him behind.

The sound of footsteps jolted me from my tears. They were faint, stomping footsteps—a group of people trampling through the forest. I pulled my cloak over my head and bent down against the fallen tree to hide. Using my magic, I urged the forest to hide me and make me appear like a boulder. It would not let me down, but it also would not work for long. I prayed the group would pass without stopping.

The footsteps grew closer, as did the voices. They were men, and from the sound of it, about half-a-dozen of them. I did not recognize their voices at first until, that is, they got a bit closer. Then, there was one voice that stood out from the rest—the bounty hunter.

He had been hunting me down since winter, and every day he drew a bit closer. I felt his presence in the village all week, but as long as I stayed near Prince Theo, I was safe from his grasp. I had dragged him across the country for months. His following had decreased over the weeks, but their stupidity never wavered. They followed his lead, convinced that finding me was a worthy cause, or that the gold would be worth it.

As for him, his bloodthirst was something else altogether. He hunted me in a way that was terrifying. He didn't care about the reward, I could tell. He hunted me because he loathed me, or rather loathed everything I represented to him.

“Did you hear that howling?” one of the huntsmen said.

“A bear, sir?” another replied, the lisp in his words giving away the fact that he had less than a handful of teeth.

“That was no bear. It was a man.”

“The witch's work, for sure,” the toothless goon countered.

Then, the bounty hunter bellowed, as if he heard nothing that the other men said. “She is headed for the pass through the mountains. I heard talk from the castle this morning that she was spotted nearby. She could not have gone far.”

“Why would she run now? She's been in the village all week.”

“With the Prince, no less. Are you sure we can trust their word?”

“I suspect we are no longer the only ones hunting her,” the hunter seethed. “If she was getting close to the Prince, it was only because of her

evil gift. And only a matter of time before they figured it out. And I'll be damned if they catch that bitch before us." At this, the men jeered.

"That howling could have been a diversion," an old voice whispered.

"She ain't that clever," another huffed, sounding almost angry.

"Women rarely are," a smaller voice mumbled. I rolled my eyes as the old men laughed. They passed so near to me that I feared they would see me or hear me breathe.

They all paused and looked up the wooded hill to where the sound of the howling call seemed to originate. I did not breathe or move, and it felt like a lifetime before they spoke again.

"Sir, we are losing our lead on her. She has surely reached the lake by now." Again, with the lisp.

The men mumbled their agreements. Finally, the bounty hunter turned to face the mountain range to the east.

"Let's get a move on," said the hunter. "We will reach the lake by nightfall. And tomorrow, we will find that witch and take her head back to the village to retrieve our bounty."

Chills ran up my spine as the men cheered.

I stayed hidden under my cloak long after my magic's endurance had expired. I wanted to stay hidden there forever, but I needed to keep moving. I needed to reach that mountain pass where I would be free forever. I glanced up to see that it was near midday.

Sneaking along the path, I traveled delicately through the wooded forest toward the east, leaving my failing shadow behind me. I deliberated. I could travel along the brook that I knew to be half a day's walk to my right. It would keep my footsteps hidden and allow me to travel more discreetly. Or I could take the more direct route to the pass that would lead me through the open plains leaving me vulnerable without cover.

I stood at the pinnacle of a small hill pondering my choices when out of nowhere, something landed hard and swift against my back. I began rolling down the hill across the brambles and leaves. There was a deep panting growl in my ears, and I realized I was not tumbling alone. It was an animal—a tall animal at my back. As we stopped falling, I felt its hand around my arm as it yanked me to stand making my head spin. A hand—no, a claw, was at my throat. I must have hit my head quite hard because I could not tell in which direction was the sky and which was the ground.

Someone was speaking. A husky voice was shouting my name but all I could focus on was the animal trying to kill me. I struggled against the hold, waiting for the teeth or the claws to break my skin. Why wasn't it biting me? My fingers grasped the long fur, and I pulled with all my might.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight to stave off the dizziness. A voice inside urged me to calm down. I took a deep breath and pulled up a bit of magic from deep down inside my gut. It resided in that quiet place inside, so deep and subtle that if no one had told me when I was young, I would never have known it was there. Like reaching into a pond full of fish, I seized a piece of that magic, and I blended it with the thought that screamed the loudest from my mind. Pain. I wanted the beast to feel the most pain as possible, so I thrust the magic and the pain out through my fingertips and into the thing that threatened to kill me.

Disoriented and exhausted, my magic was weak, but it worked. The thing howled in a way, so human-like and alive, it sent shivers through my heart. The grip on my neck was loose enough for me to escape, and I fell. I hardly even realized that it held me so far from the ground. The leaves crunched under my weight, but it was a relief to be on solid ground. It took a moment for my mind to settle itself, and once it did, I did not hesitate before standing to run.

I nearly escaped. I would have if I had not looked back. I would have been free of that thing, but my curiosity had the best of me, and I turned my head in my haste.

I did not know what to expect. Until that moment, it was not important to understand what was attacking, only to escape it. But what my eyes saw caused me to stop my running. It appeared to be a man, hunched over and writhing in pain. The black slacks and boots from my angle seemed normal and oddly familiar.

I glanced around in a panic for the beast that had me in its grasp. I distinctly remembered the feeling of cold fur against my skin. There was no other sound or movement in the trees. I looked back at the huddled mass on the ground. I blinked, once, then twice—and realization dawned.

"Theo?" I whispered. His moaning no longer seemed so animal-like anymore. He groaned into his hands as he rolled on the ground. I took a step closer.

I should have run. For everything that had transpired between me and Theo that morning—the way he betrayed me, attacked me, and what I did to

him in return—I should have bolted the moment that I realized it was him. But I didn't. Sometimes, the mind is not strong enough to contend with the heart.

So I stepped closer. I reached a hand out to touch his back.

Then he growled, "what have you done to me?" I furrowed my brows in confusion. Something about his voice was different.

I answered back in little more than a whisper. "It was just a touch of pain. I thought you would kill me. It won't last long." Why was I defending myself? I should have been the one so angry.

"No. Not that. What have you done to me?" He shouted, then he turned his body to face me, and I nearly screamed. Theo's face was almost entirely covered in coarse, black hair along his cheeks, brow, and chin. His eyes, once a beautiful crystal blue, were now jet black with no white in them at all.

And it wasn't only his face that was monstrous. The hair, that of a dark wolf's, reached down through his arms and into his hands, which now held the shape of claws, long and sharp.

I felt the color drain from my face. I whimpered a few questions of shock. "How...what..." But nothing made any sense. I was utterly dumbfounded.

My first thought was that it was not my work. I did not, could not, do that. My magic was not so powerful, and if it were, there was no way that I would have ever done that to him. I wouldn't even know how. And I would have said these things if it weren't for the way Theo was stalking toward me with such a look of anger on his face. If I didn't move quickly, he would have his claws around my neck in no time.

"Change me back," he said in a low growl. He hovered over me, at least a whole head taller. I don't remember him being so tall; was this part of the spell?

With every step he took toward me, I stepped back. I glanced around, trying to recognize my position, but with the fall and hit to the head, I was disoriented. I had no idea which way was North or where the mountain pass I was headed toward was from where I stood.

I placed my hands out in front of me, as if that would stop the towering beast. "I can't change you back. I don't know how," I cried.

"Then try," he bullied. A hand reached for me, but I was quick to avoid it.

I needed to get away and fast. I bolted back up the hill from where we had fallen. I knew that if I reached higher ground, I would be able to grasp my bearings and tell in which direction to flee. But going up the hill was a mistake. I was slow and clumsy. It didn't take long before his strong arms were pulling me back down, and again, we tumbled.

"Anabelle!" he screamed as he pinned me to the ground, his hands holding mine by the wrists. "Look at what you've done to me."

His form was frightening. His face was barely recognizable under the fur. The entire shape of his face had even changed somehow. The blackness of his eyes made the hairs on my arms stand on end, the way they do at the start of a lightning storm.

Still, under the monster, the recognition of Theo was still there. Under different circumstances, this position, under his body with his hands touching mine, would have been divine. Only twenty-four hours ago, it was all that I wanted and exactly what I expected—without the animal fur, of course. And the fighting. And betrayal.

Suddenly, that thought brought me back to the moment. I remembered how angry I was at him, and instantly it replaced the fear.

"You," I growled back in his face from the underneath his straddling hold. "You deserve this. You betrayed me. You had a dagger to my throat!"

"I betrayed you? You can't be serious."

I struggled against his grasp. "Theo, let me go!"

"Not until you change me back. I can't go back to the castle like this, Ana. They'll be looking for me. The entire village will be out here looking before long."

"Let them look. I don't care. I hope they find you and see what a monster you are."

For a brief moment, he appeared hurt. "You're a witch. A wanted criminal. Everything you said was a lie."

His breath was so close to my face that I could feel its warmth. It transported me back to last night, hiding in the shadows of the castle with his lips against mine.

"I'm not a witch," I said, my voice soft and weak from the sob lodged in my throat. "And not everything was a lie."

There was a long moment of silence. I could only stare at his mouth; his lips were all that I recognized. I wanted so badly to look into his eyes, to see them looking back at me, but the abyss of black was too deep.

Voices in the distance distracted us from our intensifying glares. The bounty hunter and his pack were not far.

“Who is that?” Theo panicked. He scurried away from where he held me down, almost as if he forgot that I would flee if given the chance. He covered his face with arms, as if that hid him at all.

“Bounty hunters. They mean to kill me.”

His head snapped to face me as if it shocked him to hear this. Did he still worry about me? Was this news at all frightening to him? Even after threatening to turn me in himself. What did he think would happen to me?

“Have you been sentenced to death?” he asked.

I laughed. “Sentencing would require a trial. They believe I am evil, and that is enough for them. All they need to receive their bounty is my head.” Theo stared at me, his brow furrowed and fierce. I would not apologize for being dramatic or graphic. I had seen the leather pouch they meant for my head; it was filthy.

His stare did not waver, and I realized that he wanted to know what I had done to deserve such a fate. He would not be granted that satisfaction. “Look, Theo,” I continued as I moved to stand, brushing leaves and thorns from my cloak. “They will not hesitate. If they see me, they will put an arrow through my heart without question. They won’t wait or let me speak. They’re too afraid of what I could do to them. So if they find me, within seconds I will be dead, and you will be stuck the way you are now forever. I don’t know where you will find another sorceress...or witch,” I snarled, “to change you back.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled my face up to meet his. “Then change me back now,” he growled. I ignored his demand.

“See that mountain range to the east. There is a pass that runs through them, just along the river, and on the other side of that mountain is my freedom.”

He squeezed even tighter. “I’ve roamed these hills my entire life. Those mountains are unpassable. Everyone knows that.”

“So you think, but from what little memory I have of my mother, she told me of that mountain pass, that it is found only with true magic, undetectable by man’s eye. And what lay beyond that mountain is farther than any bounty hunter or prince could reach. That is my freedom.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Take me there.” Immediately, he huffed at my demand. “You know the way better than I do. Help me reach that secret passage, protect me from the hunters, and as soon as we get there, I will change you back.”

“Or I can squeeze the blood from your neck until you do it now, and we can be done with all of this.”

I flinched. This wasn’t like him. The violence, the threats, the anger. This sounded more like his brothers. Theo despised them and everything they stood for. But now, I suspected they had a hand in this sudden change of heart.

“Theo,” I whispered. It was all I could muster. I don’t know if it was a plea for mercy or a call for sincerity, but I spotted the subtlest blink. It was a crack in the façade. “They will kill me anyway, so if I must die by your hand, then so be it.” My eyes did not waver from his once.

After a blood-boiling moment when neither of us spoke or moved, his shoulders finally relaxed and his near-pounce stance dissolved. “You can do it, then? If I take you there, you can change me back?”

“I am confident that I can.” I spoke with strength as I stared into those inky black eyes. I hid my hesitation, and I pushed aside the fear inside that I would not be able to change him, let alone find that hidden pass.

The Ambush

“THOSE MOUNTAINS ARE a two-day journey. We can make it by nightfall tomorrow if we travel through the night. The others will move along the river where there is an easy trail, but I think we should take the thicker part of the woods. The hills will be steeper, but the distance is shorter.” I listened to him speak as he began walking. His knowledge of the forest was keener than I expected.

“You must have spent a great deal of time out here. I always thought prince’s had better things to do than play in the woods.” I teased him, trying to lighten the mood I suppose. He kept walking ahead of me, picking his footsteps as if he were stepping in the exact place he had stepped before.

“My oldest brother gained so much attention that they hardly noticed when I had gone missing. I stayed out here for two days once when I was a boy. I expected them to be furious, but when I returned...” he glanced back at me, and I could tell that he did not mean to share so much. He didn’t need to. I knew what it was he was going to say: that when he returned, they had not even noticed that he was gone. He had not told me that story before.

It was actually out in the forest, west of the castle, that Theo and I had first met—not even a fortnight had passed since. He had frightened me out of my wits when I came across him on the trail. I had not seen another person for days, and I got the sense that he had been watching me before I found him. I knew straightaway who he was. He did not make an attempt to hide his shiny black riding boots and crimson red cloak adorned with his royal crest.

I thought immediately that my time was up, and I waited for the approaching cavalry of knights to arrest me, but they did not come. I was so frightened, that I did not notice at first how beautiful he was. He was tall, and his face had a soft roundness in the cheeks and chin. And when he smiled, deep dimples pierced either side of his face. Never in my life had someone else’s smile had such an effect on my heart. Perhaps it was the fact that I had not seen a man so clean and kind in all my life, but Theo stole my heart in that first day. It started with curious conversation, followed by

innocent friendship, but by the end the first week, it had become something neither of us could walk away from.

Of course, I did not disclose who or what I was. I would not have gotten this far in my life if I told complete strangers what I could do to them with my bare hands and a little intention. It wasn't long before I ached to tell him. I wanted to, not only to share something with him, but to release some of the burden of carrying that weight alone. I knew, deep down, that he would not condemn me. I believed he would protect me.

I was wrong.

"You must keep up!" he barked, turning to glare at me with those dark eyes. My daydreaming had caused me to lag too far behind. I pulled my pack further up onto my shoulder and I picked up my speed. Tears pricked my eyes as I thought about that kind man who greeted me in the woods not so long ago, and how much I missed him.

We traveled in a rush for the rest of the afternoon. The pace never became comfortable for me, and rather being the one running away, it felt as if I was the one being run from. We did not speak, and I occupied my mind by watching his strange form rush through the woods and how familiar the territory seemed to be for him.

Walking behind him, I started to notice subtle changes in Theo's body. Early in the walk, he stood so straight, but as the sun moved across the sky, I noticed his shoulders began to hunch. And that was not all. His hips seemed wider after the first hour and his legs did not move in the same graceful manner.

That was the first time I realized that Theo's transformation was not complete. Did he notice this too? I wondered. I certainly wasn't going to be the one to mention it. I hated to think how much worse his curse could become.

As dusk approached, my stomach ached with hunger. I had not eaten anything all day and it was getting too difficult to ignore.

"Theo, we have to rest. I'm hungry."

He did not answer but kept moving as if he didn't hear me.

"Theo, did you hear me. I want to stop." I tripped and landed clumsily against a tree. The lack of food was causing me to lose my coordination. Theo did not even glance back as I yelled from where I landed. "Theo!"

“What!” he shouted back. I flinched at his response. Apparently, it was not only his appearance that changed with the curse. His temper was monstrous to match.

I argued back. “I need to eat! And if you keep shouting like that, then you will attract that gang of imbeciles, and this whole journey will be all for naught.”

He huffed in frustration. “One hour. Rest and eat and then we continue.”

It took nearly an hour to catch the rabbit. Theo watched me set the trap with the netting and rope from my pack, and I could feel his watching eyes. I knew he wanted to correct my work, but he kept quiet behind me. And I couldn’t help but feel smug when he looked my work over without correcting them.

While the traps we laid were waiting in the hills, we wandered the woods to find suitable branches for a fire. Every few steps, we would hear movement or bird calls that caused us to freeze in our tracks to listen. As soon as we were sure that the hunters were not on our trail, we would continue our hunt.

I had something on my mind since that morning that I was dying to get off my chest.

“This morning I heard them say that they got word from the castle of my whereabouts.” I glanced out of the corner of my eye waiting for his response.

He looked at me, but it was so hard to read his mind without those human facial expressions that I had come to know so well.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Do you know who else might have known?” I was poking at the idea of maybe his brothers finding out who their little brother was engaging with in the woods every day.

He confirmed my suspicion with his silence.

“And you took their side,” I mumbled under my breath. I knew from the moment I found his face under the helmet that it had something to do with them. I had lost him to them, as I feared I would.

He must have heard my mumble because he stopped what he was doing and turned toward me with obvious anger.

“Don’t blame me for that, Ana. You had a bounty on your head long before you met me. I wasn’t the one who lied.”

“Tell yourself whatever you must, Theo.”

I tossed a rain-drenched branch against the ground in frustration. I couldn't look at him. He was right. I did have that bounty before I met him. I knew it some way, I was wrong. I lied. I hid the truth from him. I was a wanted criminal, sentenced to die. I was dangerous and not to be trusted. But that did not change the fact that I was entirely disappointed in Theo. I walked ahead, avoiding his gaze.

“Don't you want to tell me what you did?” I didn't answer. “Are there more fur-covered princes out there?”

I glared back at him. “Not funny.”

“Just tell me,” he insisted.

“I didn't do anything,” I answered.

“Come on now, tell me.”

“I told you. I didn't do anything.” I raised my voice and winced for losing my temper. After chiding him so much for being so loud, I would need to be more careful.

“You expect me to believe that people want you dead because you did nothing.”

“It is as insane as it sounds.”

“That doesn't make any sense, Anabelle. There has to be something, and I'm assuming you're just too ashamed of whatever you did to tell me.”

I stopped what I was doing. I could feel my hands clench into fists, and I honestly did not know if he said that to trick me into talking.

“I told you; I didn't do anything wrong,” I said more quietly. I kept my back to him because I didn't want to see his face as I spoke. I didn't care for pity much. “Everything I told you before about my family was true. I was on my own from a young age. To most, I was odd, but never much of a threat. Then, stories began to spread about me. I was a witch who traveled the countryside turning men into sheep—which I have never done—and stealing children from their mothers. The stories only became more and more ridiculous, and just when I thought people would stop believing in them, they proved me wrong. Before you, I had never hurt another soul or ever used my magic on them, at least not in a harmful way. I do not curse people or steal children. People just needed someone to blame, so they blame me.”

I turned to face him, and I was met with his most human-looking expression yet. It wasn't pity, but more like empathy. My voice was still full

of bitterness.

“And the only thing I am ashamed of is falling too easily for empty promises.”

He looked as if he were ready to reply to my insult, but his words were cut off by the echoing sound of ugly snarls coming from the thick woods around us. Instinctively, I stepped closer to Theo as we both searched the darkening forest for the source of the growls. I could see something subtle stalking slowly through the trees.

“Stay behind me,” he said. I glanced up at him in confusion. Did he really think he was beast enough to take on a pack of hungry wolves?

Without any further warning, something pounced. A large gray wolf snapped his jaws at me so quickly, that I thought I felt it bite although it did not make contact. I fell backward and covered my body with my arms as two more jumped in, but they did not come for me. One latched its teeth onto Theo’s arm while the other drew blood at his side.

Theo fought them off, but he was quickly overwhelmed by the size of the pack. He swung his arms at them, kicking at the ones who tried to take him by the legs. His grunts and shouts started to blend with theirs, and within moments I became lost in the battle. Theo was like nothing I had ever seen. He was no longer a man, but not yet an animal—and he fought them like both.

But just as one began to launch for his neck, Theo looked in my eyes and pleaded. “Ana, help me,” he cried. I suddenly felt so helpless, as I did not know if he meant from the wolves or from this strange thing he was becoming.

The largest of the wolves took another leap for his neck, but Theo’s reflexes were faster. In a swift movement, he had the animal by the neck. I clenched my eyes shut fast enough before I heard the deafening crack of the snapping neck. Then, silence.

I did not want to open my eyes, but once I heard the deep, gasping breath coming from Theo, I shot them open to find him kneeling, covered in blood with the lifeless animal laying before him. The other wolves had frozen around Theo as if they were just as surprised by what he had done. They began to sniff the body of what appeared to be their alpha, then became erratic and restless hopping around Theo, barking and snapping at each other.

“Get out of here!” he bellowed, half-shouting, half-roaring. The animals shot away from the scene in a flash.

Theo did not move. I could see blood leaking from a wound in his arm, under the fur. I had a moment where I considered running. He was too hurt to chase me, and he seemed too transfixed on the dead wolf.

But it was the way he stared at the animal that kept me in my spot. There was regret in his eyes. And I reminded myself that I did this to him. The Theo I knew would never have had the savage in him to kill an animal so easily.

“Theo,” I whispered.

He managed one agonizing glance in my direction before his dark eyes closed and he fell limp to the ground.

The Confession

WHEN THEO CAME to, it was well into the night. I had a low fire burning, and the two rabbits we caught were well-done, ready. And although I was ravenous, I waited until he was awake to eat. I cleaned up his wounds as well as I could and moved the alpha to a shallow burial in the hills so that Theo would not have to face him again.

I didn't say anything to him as he woke. I handed him the warm meat and a canteen of water. He accepted them with a nod and devoured them both.

After we both finished eating, the silence became almost unbearable. I could feel him staring at me across the burning embers.

"What did you do to me?" he asked finally. His voice was losing its pitch. It was starting to sound more and more like a growl, strangled to make words and inflections.

"I told you," I said, staring at the fire. "I don't know what the magic did."

"How do you not know? You were the one who cursed me."

"It's not a curse. It doesn't work that way."

"Then, how do I know you can even fix it?"

"Because you can trust me," I said without looking at him. I prodded the fire with a long branch and let the flames warm my cold fingertips. He was silent as well. We both sat in awkward silence as the flames cracked and whistled.

Finally, he spoke.

"How was I to know? How was I to know that you meant me no harm? What would you have thought? If you were me..."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I didn't want to be angry. I was too tired to even attempt it.

"Anabelle, as far as I knew, you were the traitor. My brothers showed me the bounty posters, told me I had been tricked, that I was weak for falling for your spells. I felt like a fool."

"I expected you to trust me."

"When you lied to me!"

"You took their side over mine!"

“They’re my brothers!”

“You told me you loved me!”

We both sighed knowing that our argument was becoming too heated and too loud. We were already taking a risk with the fire.

He continued. “Perhaps if you remember the moment that you cursed me, what you were thinking at the time...maybe you would know what the magic did...”

I looked up at him. “What difference does it make?”

“Look at me! It makes a difference to me. You claim to care about me so much, but it sure didn’t stop you from turning me into this!”

“That was before I found out what a coward you were.”

“I’m the coward? I’m not the one running.”

“You have no idea what it’s like to face hatred everywhere you go. To grow up without anyone to love you or even care whether you stay or you go. To be so alone. All I wanted was someone to just see me, not the witch or the cursed child. To see fear in the eyes of anyone who dared get too close. And then...and then I met you...and...” I fought back the tears. My throat screamed in pain as I wanted to sob. He stared blankly at me. “How could I have told you, Theo? I wanted to. I wanted to believe that you would look past it. No, in fact, I hoped you would embrace it.”

He didn’t speak or move, only stared at me. His face was blank and I could not read what he was thinking, but the pain I had felt that day in the forest felt fresh and new. “You broke my heart. That’s what I was thinking when I put the spell on you. I was thinking that you were worse than the rest of them because for those few wonderful days, you gave me hope. You let me believe that I could be happy. That I wouldn’t have to be alone or run. You let me think for a moment that I would find happiness, love...a family.” Tears were streaming down my face now. That wound that I had been ignoring all day felt raw and open now. I didn’t want to own up to any of these feelings, but after the day it had been, it was useless to be guarded anymore. “Then, you took it all away, Theo. What you did was worse than all the rest. That’s what I was thinking...” Suddenly, realization dawned on me. I felt like shrinking into myself and turning away from him because I finally knew what it was that I did. I knew what I was thinking at the time that I set my magic on him.

“What was it?” he asked, his voice blank and stern as if he could see the realization just as I did.

My voice squeaked out the words through the tears, ashamed of saying them out loud. “Unlovable. Unworthy of love. A monster.” The words sickened my stomach as they left my lips and the emotion of regret and pain hung in the air between us.

He looked away from me, but the remorse on his face was plain to see. He looked as awful as I felt.

What he did to me was terrible, but what I wished upon him was unforgivable. I knew that it was simply a culmination of hurt and pain over my entire lifetime that I put into that curse, but I never meant to unleash so much hatred onto him. To be unlovable was a curse that no one should ever be subjected to...how could I have done that to him? The person I loved more than anyone.

The rest of the night was cold, silent, and miserable. Neither of us got up to leave, and I knew that Theo was in more pain than he let on. I don't know when I fell asleep, but I remember the sensation of tears spilling through my closed lids when I drifted off.

It was not yet dusk when Theo nudged me awake and urged me to eat something before we started our journey again. I asked him how his wounds were healing, but he gave a quick, curt nod and dismissed the subject.

He was being oddly gentle that morning. We walked much slower than the day before, and although I suspected it was because of his injuries, I also felt his presence so much closer too. He walked next to me, sometimes leaning on me over large steps or allowing me to lean on him. At one point, as we found an easy path to traverse, he walked at my side, his beast-like hand resting on the small of my back as if he were protecting me.

For the most part, the journey was quiet. We didn't bring up any more arguments or questions and kept our conversation to the forest and the journey.

The silence allowed my mind to daydream while we walked. Having him so close only made the memories worse. I reminisced on the night of the masquerade ball—the night before it all ended. I was so nervous to be there, among the royalty and the rich. He promised me that he would keep me safe and that no one would bother me. He escorted me in, much like he walked next to me on the path. He whispered in my ear all night, telling me

who in the party he despised more than others. He kept me close, and although the room was crowded, I felt like he and I were the only two there.

And the thing that I loved most about Theo was made so much clearer that night. He had a way of treating me like I was the only one who mattered. He was not above me or better than me. He respected me, listened to me, and as he confessed that night, loved me.

I suppose it's what brought us together in the first place. We were both outcasts in a way. He was the youngest of three brothers, but not nearly as hungry for power as the other two. Being third in line meant being ignored very often, and although he would have made the best king out of the three, he was discarded before he even had a chance.

On the night of the ball, we both agreed that although it was lovely, it wasn't where we belonged. And before long, we found ourselves back outside, away from the crowd and finding solace in each other.

"I've been thinking," he said. His hands were in my hair which he did so often, and our foreheads were pressed together as we stood together outside the castle walls.

"Hmm..." I murmured back in response.

"We should get out of here."

"Where would you like to go?" I asked. My face remained hidden under the mask from the ball, and I felt as if there was a permanent smile frozen on my face.

"Away. Anywhere." My heartbeat quickened as his words started to sink in. I assumed he meant getting out of here tonight, but I suspected he meant something much more serious.

I pulled away and lifted the mask from his eyes.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"Anabelle, I'm talking about running away together. As long as we stay here, we can never truly be together. We could live out in the woods for all I care. I don't want to stay in this life anymore. I don't want to be a useless prince."

I couldn't answer. My voice felt locked in my throat, and all I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears. It felt like too much at once—too much happiness. Too much hope.

I stared at his face, my mouth hanging open in shock. I could see in his eyes the love and honesty that he showed every single day I had spent with

him. My initial reaction was to say no, but as I felt his fingers run through my hair, I knew that he was right. My time here with him was waning, and before long I would risk being caught if I stayed. I was going to lose him forever, and I suddenly felt desperate to avoid that.

And once I let myself accept that idea, I fell head first into it. “Yes,” I answered.

“Really?” he asked, seemingly surprised as I was by my response.

“Yes. Of course,” I whispered back as tears pricked my eyes.

He smiled that brilliant smile and lifted the mask from my face as he kissed me. And when he pulled away he whispered those three special words in my ear, and I suddenly feared that that night would be the happiest night of my life. Because to me, there was nothing more terrifying than being happy.

I snapped myself back to the present as I walked next to Theo. I glanced over at him, and he glanced back. I swallowed down the fear as I looked at his face and how different it had become. He no longer had those soft, round cheeks, and there was no sign of those dimples that pierced either side of his face when he smiled. In fact, his face had taken on the shape of an animal’s so much that I doubted he even had the ability to smile anymore.

I looked away. We were getting closer and closer to the pass and I could not shake the feeling that things between us would not end well. Either I would not be able to cure him, and the world would never see his smile again—or I do, and I have to say goodbye forever.

The Mountain

IT WAS NEAR dusk when he approached the foot of the mountain range. We stood, surveying our surroundings, both of us on edge. Not only did we have to fear the hunter's army waiting to find me at the pass, but we also had the impending task of changing him back.

I looked at him, waiting for him to demand that I deliver my part of the bargain. By that point, I dreaded it.

"We should just camp here for the night. It seems quiet enough."

I'm sure the surprise was obvious on my face. I quickly agreed and wondered if he was feeling the same hesitation as I was. I studied his face but could find no sign of forgiveness there. In fact, there was no expression there at all.

We opted to skip the fire that night because the risk of the hunters being so close was greater than the night before. Of course, this only meant one thing: for warmth, we would have to stay close—to each other.

We found a small, cozy cave to hide in where we ate the rest of the now-stale bread from my pack and a few berries we collected along the way. I caught Theo examining his clawed hand as we ate. I nearly offered to change him back at that moment, but I admit, I was too scared. What if I changed him back and he immediately left? What if I could not change him at all?

We nestled against the rock wall side-by-side using my cloak to cover us. As it became very dark, and I started to shiver, he opened his arm so that I could rest against his chest. For the first time since the ball, it felt like Theo again, but I urged myself not to become too content. In the morning, he would rid himself of my presence forever.

Somewhere during the night, Theo's restless shivers woke me from my light sleep. At first, I suspected it was from the cold, but as I watched him in the moonlight, I noticed that he was suffering. His face was set in a grimace and his jerks showed signs of pain.

I quickly tried to wake him, placing my hands against his chest and shaking him while whispering his name. He woke easily, but the panic was clear. It took too long for him to recognize me or where we were.

“Are you alright?” I whispered. He did not answer. He only stared at me as if he did not know me. “Theo, talk to me.” My voice shook with fear. I hated how distant he had gotten. “Theo!” I pleaded again, still keeping my voice as quiet as it would go.

With one blink, he seemed to reach that realization. “I’m fine,” he answered. “What time is it? Maybe we should get moving.” He started to stand, and I nearly stopped him and reminded him that it was still the middle of the night, but I had a new sense of urgency about this. Theo was slipping. The beast was taking over, and if we didn’t reach that pass in time, it could be too late to change him back at all.

“So, how exactly do you use magic to find this passageway?” he asked after we had spent the rest of the dark hours climbing slowly up the foot of the mountain to the canyon platform above.

“Don’t be cross with this answer, but I don’t actually know.” I heard him laugh behind me as we made the last few steep steps up the rock exterior.

“Well, then I guess it is a good thing that the bargain we made didn’t depend on you finding your way through.” Again, he laughed, and I tried to laugh too, but that truth was too raw.

Finally, we reached the canyon—the exact point at which the two mountain peaks split. To anyone looking from afar, it would appear to be one large mountain; but everyone in the area knew that they were actually two mountains pressed so close together that they seemed as one.

From there on that canyon floor, it felt as if the whole world had opened up. What was on the other side of that mountain? I had never thought this far ahead of the plan. If I made it to the pass, and I actually found my way through, what would be waiting for me on the other side? These thoughts kept coursing through my mind as we took a moment to rest in the shade and catch our breath after the climb.

“I used to come up here as a child and pretend that I was from another kingdom, and I had just discovered this valley. How beautiful it is from up here...” he said as we stared out at the view.

“You conquered this new kingdom, and would be their new king,” I said. He didn’t say anything for a moment, so I looked over at him as he stared out at the expanse. “They would be lucky to have you as their king.”

“I have no desire to be king,” he answered frankly.

“Then, to discover new kingdoms? To travel the farthest corners of the world.” This time he glanced over at me and met my eyes. I know it was risky to bring up the idea that he had spoken about at the ball. I don’t know what I was trying to accomplish by mentioning that, but I could tell by his response that it would not accomplish much at all.

“Let’s get on with this then.” And with that, he walked away.

I gulped down my nerves as he stood before me in the shade of the mountain peak. He put the dark cavern that separated the two great rocks behind him, and I put the harrowing ledge that dropped to the bottom of the mountain behind me.

We stood facing each other as if we were two in a duel. I tried to hide how much my hands shook. He stared at me, waiting.

“I’m ready, Anabelle.” His voice shook; something was not right.

I stepped up and rest my hands against his chest. Closing my eyes, I imagined the fish in the pond—those little pieces of magic that I could harness and push through my fingers into him. In my mind, the words repeated, change him back, change him back, change him back.

It felt very hollow as if the magic was fading as soon as it left my fingertips. I took another deep breath and pressed again. Change him back. Change him back!

I opened my eyes to find his animal-face inches from mine. The wolf’s hair had completely covered his skin now. He could tell right away that it was not working, and he turned his back on me and started walking away. I could see the pain in his stance. He was changing faster every moment. Time was running out.

“Are you in pain?” I asked. But he didn’t answer. He walked back to his place in front of me and waited for me to try again.

“Please try,” he asked, but his voice was almost unrecognizable now.

“I promise,” I answered.

Palms pressed against his chest again, I pushed and pushed, begging it to work, to no avail.

“I think it’s getting worse. Ana, please!” he shouted at me as he cringed from the struggle of even speaking so loudly.

“I’m sorry,” I cried. I had no answers, and everything at that moment felt helpless. I could not change him, and I would not leave him. In an instant, all of those dreams had once again been dashed.

I crouched near him as he struggled, his face contorted in anguish. I could feel him slipping. With every breath, it seemed his form changed more. I felt myself paralyzed with fear that he would change forever and that I would have no way to change him back. Tears began to pool in my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Theo,” I cried against his back. “I’m so sorry.”

Without warning, the whooshing sound of an arrow skimmed the flesh of my left shoulder. I screamed and fell back into the low stream of water that trailed from the tops of the mountain. It soaked my arms and cloak in the shallow water. Theo quickly tried to stand, but clearly could not straighten his back. He hovered his body over mine as we watched the approaching men come out of their hiding spots in the shadowy cavern. They came from every side, and the low, taunting laugh of the bounty hunter approached from behind.

“Didn’t I tell you boys this would be worth the wait?”

A chorus of questions and howls came from the men as they approached. I stared up, not fully understanding what they were reacting to, until I looked at Theo next to me. So little of the man that I knew was left, but there was enough to know that he truly was a man. It was him they were looking at. It was him that they now wanted.

They called him a monster, an abomination. These were the things they once called me. And there I sat next to the thing that I had created, the ruin I had wrought upon the world, the mess I had made.

His face was caught in panic—the look an animal made when it was in danger. He crouched on his legs, arms out as if to protect me from them.

The pack of men stalked toward us with their bows drawn and axes held ready to strike when something to the left caught my eye. It was the sun’s reflection on the water that pooled near the floor of the cavern. I studied the way it seemed to run into the cavern instead of out. That was the stream of water that fed the river below. That was the way through the two mountains. How had no one noticed that?

I felt a quick jolt of excitement. It was a risk, and if I were wrong, it would mean our immediate demise, but we could make a run for it.

“Put your hands up in surrender, witch. We have you surrounded.” I could feel the eyes of the men holding arrows drawn on me. Any moment could be my last. Then, I heard a low growl coming from Theo. Except it wasn’t just a growl. He was speaking to me.

“Run,” he said. I slowly started to raise my arms as I glanced again at the narrow pass. Did he see the passage way too? Was he thinking what I was thinking? I could feel the dirt between my boot as I turned to move. My muscles were prepared to pounce until I heard him speak again. “I’ll distract them.” My body froze beneath me.

“What?” I whispered back. We were running out of time. The men advanced so close now that an escape was becoming impossible.

“Go!” he growled again.

“But if I leave...” I whispered back.

“Now!” he answered as he pounced on the nearest man. I watched as he swiped a heavy clawed hand against the man’s face and blood spilled across the bubbling brook. My body filled with adrenaline and I made quick to move. My mind did not think; I only ran. Arrows flew by as I dropped down off the ledge into the cavern, following the water’s line and into the small space where the men could not see. Quickly, I was moving along the rocks and into the ravine of the mountains. In a second, I was completely hidden within the mountains and what I saw before seemed almost impossible. The pass was completely hidden to the outside world. It was a narrow ravine that carved along the side of the rocks, through the darkness, I could see the hint of daylight on the other side.

I had found the pass.

I turned to find Theo, a look of excitement on my face. But I was met with the sounds of a struggle. Men were shouting, and it sounded as if an animal was howling.

My hands shook with fear. I could run. I could be free within moments. I was nearly free already. But they would likely keep Theo alive to take him back to their village to claim a reward for capturing such an abomination. And if he struggled too much, they would take him back dead.

He did that for me. My knees buckled under my weight. He sacrificed himself for me, knowing that without me, he would never be returned to himself again. And worse, they would likely kill him.

I turned back to the subtle light at the end of the cavern’s pass. Freedom.

But if I ran, and I let him die...what would I become?

I was no better than Theo with the dagger hiding behind the helmet. I was no better than the bounty hunter desperate to kill something more powerful than he.

I could run for the rest of my life, but I would never be able to escape what I had become.

I turned back to the sound of the fighting—toward my certain death—and I ran.

The Edge

I PEERED UP from the lower ledge of the ravine and saw that Theo had been tied by the feet on his back, still putting up a fight against the men. They used clubs and whips to attempt to subdue him, but he managed to dodge most of their blows. I noticed the bodies of at least three men on the ground, two deathly still and one moaning in pain. That left three to try and capture the half-man, half-animal in another rope that they intended for his arms and neck. They were still well-armed.

I hid myself again to consider my next move. One thing was clear: I could not overpower them without magic. But there weren't many charms that I knew were strong enough to defeat seven strong men, no matter how many of them were unconscious. I could try to change their form, but I could not change seven men at once.

I couldn't even change Theo back just a few moments ago. And if I had, this whole thing would not have happened. Still, it was my only hope in helping him now. An idea began to blossom when I was interrupted by a sudden thought—

Seven men. There were seven men. I counted them again. One was missing.

And no sooner than I noticed it did a cold, gloved hand reach around my neck and pull me away from the ledge. He was so strong and brutal that he did not hold back because I was a woman. He slammed my back up against the rock, and I whimpered. I could feel him pulling me toward something, away from the darkness of the ravine pass. I could sense the ledge and fatal drop-off ahead. I fought and squirmed to free myself of his hold.

"I don't need your head anymore, witch. I have something far better. So, I'm afraid that you won't be traveling back to our village with us, but you will be traveling," he laughed.

He dragged my body effortlessly to the edge of the cavern ledge. My death was just moments away. This was it. Moments ago, I tasted freedom, now I would die a meaningless death at the hands of a monster.

I had to make one last fight, so I dug deep within. I pulled at something primal and instinctive. I reached for the magic with the desperation only found when death was so near. And as soon as I harnessed that feeling, it

became easy to manipulate it. I sobbed and cried as he pushed me toward the nothingness. I yanked free that inane magic and I collided it with the one thing that I wanted most when facing the hunter—and those like him. Confidence.

It coursed through my veins like fire. I was stronger, braver, and more determined. The toes of my boots froze peeking over the edge, and I pressed back against the hunter. And thinking about all of those before him who had ever cast me away for who I was, and tried to make me feel inferior because I was different, I shoved back the bounty hunter until he nearly fell. The shock was written on his face.

“Witch,” he snarled.

“You don’t scare me anymore,” I answered.

This answer only angered him more. He took off in a run toward me, leading with his shoulder as if he meant to take both of us off the cliff.

The impact was electrifying as our bodies collided and I struggled to keep my boots from sliding toward the edge. A sharp, hot pain pulsed my gut, but I kept my strength. He gritted his teeth in my face, and even though he meant to take us both over the edge, he seemed pleased, as if he had already won.

We were in a stalemate, neither of us moving in one direction or the other as we both pressed against each other to no avail. I could feel my strength waning. Just around the corner, I could hear the beast howling and men clamoring. The hunter pushed harder and my boots inched backward.

I could not die. Not yet.

In one swift motion, my last attempt at salvation, I turned my body allowing the brute of a man to be overcome by his own momentum. Just as he realized that he was falling, we locked eyes. I felt a moment’s remorse because I realized that this man’s drive was never about me, and it was just as tragic. He hated me because he feared me, and in that battle, he would never win.

I turned away from the ledge and toward the fight. I was renewed and entirely confident that I could do what needed to be done. I took off in a leap toward Theo when a burning sensation pulsed through my gut.

I pressed my hand against the pain and found my robes soaked with blood. The hunter must have had a dagger in his hand when we collided.

I fell to my knees in the mountain stream. I heard men laughing, but all sounds and sights became fuzzy. Then, Theo roared again, and I felt

renewed.

I had one last task and thought it would require every last ounce of energy and magic in my body, I was determined to finish what I had started.

Taking a deep breath, I stood. Shaking off the pain, I rounded the corner, climbed out of the ravine and marched toward Theo's writhing body on the ground. I kept my eyes locked on his face, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see the men load their arrows ready to strike, but they did not let them fly. They did not move at all.

Something ethereal took over as I moved, as if I was no longer in control. I had never felt my magic become so powerful in all my life. Theo and I were untouchable. My eyes never left his stare. I could see his mouth moving, as if he were calling to me, telling me to run, begging me to save myself, but I did not listen. I knelt by his side and touched his face.

"Ana, use your magic. Save yourself. I know you can." Theo whispered to me with his strangled, animal-like voice. He pleaded so desperately for me to save myself, but that thought wasn't even on my mind. It would have been a waste to try. I ignored his requests and I reached out to him.

Touching his face felt like freedom in itself. I could hear him pleading still, but I had only one mission on my mind. I held his face in my hands as my tears spilled over my cheeks, and even though my focus was fading, I could still feel that magic within, so I held it in my hands as I stroked his face.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was. I should have trusted you. I'm sorry I cursed you, and I'm sorry that I could not do this earlier." My voice was nothing more than a whisper, but I pressed through the urge to lie down and let go. "You are not unlovable, Theo. I love you."

I pressed my face against his and let my body against him, and I could feel him struggle against his ties. No matter how hard I tried, I could not peel my lids back open. I heard my name from his lips as I drifted off to sleep, and I felt the warm skin of his hands in my hair. Then, I was back in the ravine, and I was falling toward that subtle sunlight of freedom on the other side.

The Dream

I DREAMT THAT my magic was a river and it ran over me, like a breeze in the sails of a ship. It was cool and constant, pushing me farther and farther away. I did not swim against it or fight it, but I let it carry me. And it carried me forever, in a never-ending current.

Then, I heard Theo's voice. I searched for it, but it faded away.

It called again and again, each time closer. So I started to swim against waves that pulled me away. It felt impossible, but I fought harder and harder, each time gaining a little ground. He urged me to fight and begged me to try harder, so I did. And just when I reached the shore, I opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw were his crystal blue eyes. He stared down at me, the bright blue sky behind him, with a look of desperation and relief on his face.

"Anabelle?" he whispered.

It felt as if I had been sleeping for a lifetime. Everything came rushing back: the curse, the hunters, the dagger, the mountain pass. I sat up quickly and looked around.

"They're gone," he answered my question without my having to ask it. "You reversed the curse, but it seems they never knew who I truly was. One look at me, and they fled. We're safe now."

I turned to him. "The curse."

He held my hand in his. I looked down at his hand, his familiar hand without claws or wolf's fur. I squeezed and looked up into his eyes. We stared into each other's eyes, without speaking but knowing that there was an apology there—from both of us. We both had so much regret, but we were both ready to let it go.

With the next breath, we both wrapped each other up in a hasty embrace. I wrapped my arms around his neck and felt so much gratitude. He was back to himself. I was alive. And soon, I would be free.

It felt like forever before we let each other go.

"I thought you were dead," he said, finally.

"I think I was, but something brought me back." I felt where the wound was. It was still sore and healing. I thought back to that miraculous moment

when my magic took over. I realized what it was that gave me such control. I looked up at Theo's face. "Theo, I meant what I said. Before we have to say goodbye, I want you to know that it's true, and it may mean nothing to you, but I do love you."

He answered my confession with a kiss. I tried to savor the touch of his lips and the smell of his skin, but it ended too quickly. And I felt a knot in my throat at the nearing moment when we would have to say goodbye.

My freedom no longer seemed so exhilarating. We stood and gathered our things, as well as the ropes and weapons left by the hunters. Then, we stood at the mouth of the cave, and I waited for his goodbye. But it never came.

Instead, he took my hand in his and stepped through the ravine with me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Doing what I should have done before. I'm going with you."

Tears filled my eyes as I stared at his smile, the soft, round smile with the dimples that pierced his cheeks, and I squeezed his hand tighter. Then, together we stepped into the darkness and walked toward our freedom.

About the Author

Jessica Bucher is long-time lover of stories about young love and stubborn characters. This might explain why she was swept off her feet by a soldier who stole her away to travel the world. Thirteen years later, they have three children and more stamps in their passports than they can count. Seeing the world has inspired many stories and novels, including her debut novel, *The Hereafter*. She is a Creative Writing graduate, freelance editor, and Disney addict.

Also available from Jessica Bucher: [The Hereafter](#)

jules & jameson:

Reaching for the Stars

Jeannine Colette

A TALE OF a woman who wanted to live beyond the gates of her manor,
and the Beast who broke down her walls.

Jules and Jameson
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THE BEGINNING

“JULES BELLE BRADFORD, this is no way for a young woman to behave!”

I slump my shoulders and look down, knowing there is no use arguing with my mother. She is standing at the foot of the grand staircase. Her arms are crossed in front of her body as she looks down at me with a scowl on her freshly threaded brow.

She taps her foot. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Looking up, I shrug in apology. “I just wanted to get a breath of fresh air.”

“In your gown?” she shrieks. “You spent all morning getting your hair and makeup done. Now, you look,” she throws her arms up in exasperation, “oh, I don’t even know what we’re going to do with you. And your dress,” she looks like she’s going to cry, “what is that all over that beautiful silk?”

I glance down at the champagne colored fabric mother selected for the March Soiree. It’s the social event of the year at the country club. Mother chose this gown to match her own gold dress and father’s tie making our family looking perfectly united in metallic colored cloth.

Except mine is now covered in, “mud.”

“Mud!” She is practically foaming at the mouth. I didn’t mean to get my dress dirty. After spending the morning getting plucked and pulled, I needed out of the Manor, our home on the southern end of Long Island, New York. The confinement of the salon chair and the tightness of my corset was all too much.

I couldn’t breathe.

So, I went out on the veranda for some fresh air. The ocean that swells just beyond our property looked too inviting. The sun was still bright in the sky, warming the chill of early spring. I closed my eyes and took in a heaping breath of the Atlantic. When I opened my eyes, an object in the sky caught my attention. Hovering in the blue backdrop was a faint white circle.

I never noticed the moon in the daytime before. I stepped back and took notice of this piece of heaven that glimmers so bright and magnanimous in

the evening; yet sits in the shadows of the day, unnoticed, waiting for its time to shine.

Needing to be closer, I started walking down the steps toward the beach. The closer I got, the harder the wind blew. I didn't want to get my dress full of sand so I avoided the beach and followed a path that led to the great lawn on the side of our home. My shoes landed in a pile of wet grass left over from the torrential rainstorms we've been having. I picked up the front of my gown, neglecting to lift the back, which means I must have been dragging the silk through the mud.

I don't know why I was so fixated on the moon. Whatever I did, couldn't stop staring.

"What is all the commotion?" Aunt Ina comes into the foyer from the living room. She's wearing a pink suit and a pillbox hat.

Mother points at me dramatically, "Look at her dress!"

Aunt Ina turns to me. Her eyes widen when she sees the shape of my attire, then quickly bites back a laugh, before forming a very serious frown. "Oh, child, what have you done?"

"She's ruined my evening is what she's done. I have one child and she can't follow simple instructions." Mother grips the banister for support. "Honestly, Jules, it's as if you are trying to torture me. Why can't you be like the other girls?"

Aunt Ina quickly places her hands on my shoulders. "Now, now, no need for dramatics. I'm sure Jules has something beautiful up in that large closet of hers. We'll go up and see what we can find." She pushes me up the staircase, past mother and up to my room in the east wing.

When the door closes behind us, Aunt Ina shakes her head at me. "You're too much trouble for your own good."

"It was an accident, I swear. I was just walking and became distracted." I pull a twig out of my hair. For the life of me, I can't imagine where it came from.

She walks up to me and grabs my chin, pulling my attention toward her. "Your head is always in the clouds. A dreamer you are. It is one of your most redeeming qualities. It's also your greatest flaw." She lets out a sigh. "I suppose that's part of being fifteen."

Aunt Ina walks into my walk-in closet, the kind that is larger than most people's bedrooms and rifles through my wardrobe. I have dozens of dresses I've only worn once.

As the only child of Franklin and Vivienne Bradford, I attend every charity and social function alongside them. Being at these affairs is, as my mother says, “a greater education than anything I’d find in a book.”

“Do I have to go tonight? I’ve already ruined everyone’s evening.” I know it’s a long shot but it’s worth trying.

She comes out of the closet with three dresses on hangers. She holds up a great, big, pile of tulle. “How about this red one?”

I shake my head. “The girls my age don’t care to talk to me and when they do it’s always about clothes or what car their daddy is going to get them for their sixteenth birthday. And the boys, all they do is talk about themselves. I never know what to say to the adults. Mother’s friends act like my ambition is a flaw and father always runs off to smoke a cigar.”

She lifts a lime green satin dress with spaghetti straps.

I shake my head again then continue, “And the last time we went to one of these things I spilt my drink all over some lady’s dress. It was embarrassing.”

“It was the Mayor’s wife and, you’re right, it was terribly embarrassing. Nevertheless, you are a Bradford and we rise against the obstacles. What about this one?” It’s a deep blue dress with a satin bow neck top and a jacquard bottom. It’s one of the more comfortable dresses I’ve worn.

I hold out my hand for it. I change and then lift out my arms to the side, asking Aunt Ina if I look presentable. She motions for me to take a seat at the vanity. I do as I’m told and sigh.

Her hands are in my hair, trying to fix the mess the ocean winds have made of it, when she catches my reflection in the mirror. “Jules, why do you always seem so sad? Don’t you like parties?”

“I like them fine. I just . . .” It’s hard to express how I feel without seeming like the world’s most selfish brat. “Everyone at these affairs are all so stiff. Their conversation is stale and their smiles are plastic. I want adventure.”

Aunt Ina stops brushing my hair and places a hand on my shoulder. Looking in the mirror she says, “You have your whole life for adventure. Stop trying to rush it. And in the meantime, enjoy the parties. Because one day there may not be any for you to attend. Then what would you do with all those pretty dresses?”

I roll my eyes. “Burn them.” Shifting in my seat I say, “They’re all so itchy. Maybe I’ll become a fashion designer and create the world’s most

comfortable dresses.”

She’s fussing with my hair, magically smoothing out the tangles. “I’ll be your first investor. There,” she says, stepping back, “you look like a princess.”

Staring at my reflection, I take a glimpse of myself in mirror. Long blonde hair and hazel eyes. I’m a touch on the short side and my boobs have yet to come in. A nice growth spurt in both directions would do me good. Overall I’m okay to look at, but a princess I am not.

“Let’s get you out of here before your mother has a heart attack.” She walks out the room and I follow.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I hear my father’s voice. Peering down, I see him with his head full of richly dark hair and a double breasted suit. He’s talking to Randall, the house manager.

“He’s awfully young. I need someone who knows classic cars,” Father says to Randall.

“Trust me, Sir, the boy knows his cars. You know that 1967 Ford Mustang that Willis Hendricks won’t sell you? He built it.”

Father’s face lights up. “He built it? Bring him in.”

“Yes sir.” Randall opens the front door and makes a hand motion to someone outside. A stranger follows him back in.

He has on tattered jeans and a brown button down flannel shirt. His hair is long, dark and held back in a ponytail and his face is covered in a thick beard. “I’d like you to meet Jameson Brock.”

Father lifts his chin at him in appraisal. “How old are you?”

“Twenty,” the man says. His voice is deep and low.

“How do you know so much about cars?”

“Just something I’ve always been interested in. Been working for auto shops since I was fourteen.”

Father stares at the stranger for a few moments, quietly sizing him up, then says, “Alright. We’ll start you out on a trial basis.”

“There is one problem,” Randall steps in. “The boy doesn’t have a place to live.”

Father balks, “Where have you been living?”

“I’m in-between homes at the moment, sir. I’ll look for a room in town.” Jameson’s stance appears confident, but his words are insecure.

Father laughs. “Rent a room in this town? Impossible. The nearest affordable town is a thirty minute drive. Do you have a car?”

Jameson shakes his head. "Not at the moment."

Randall moves in, "I was thinking he could have the room above the garage. A bed. A bathroom. He'll have to figure something out for food though."

Father thinks the idea over. "Would be nice to have someone here at all hours. You'd have to act as a twenty-four hour valet. No drugs and no women in my home. I have a young daughter. I don't need her witnessing vagrancy. You do what you need to do somewhere else. The Manor is a vice free property."

"Absolutely. Thank you. The opportunity is greatly appreciated," Jameson says.

A clearing of a throat calls everyone's attention to the top of the stairs. Aunt Ina starts her descent. "I don't mean to break up this introduction, however we have an event to get to."

Father looks at his watch. "Yes, where are Vivienne and Jules?"

"I'm right here," I say. I'm not halfway down the stairs when Jameson notices me, and my feet halt mid-step. My heart skips a beat, and it's as if all the air had vanished from my lungs, as I'm struck by the most stunning pair of blue-green eyes I have ever seen.

With a slow step forward, I try not to fall as I take in the rugged features of his face. That beard is short and unkempt, but it highlights his strong jaw and full lips. His chest is broad and standing at six feet tall, he has a presence that is overpowering. If I hadn't heard him speak, I would think he was a brute of a man. Someone who walks into a room and thrashes about, owning it and not caring what others think. But I heard his words and the softness to his voice. This hardened man is soft and insecure. And from the look in his eyes, he is yearning for something and I have a compulsory need to know what that is.

I reach the bottom step and swallow, my attention still pulled toward Jameson.

Mother bursts into the room. "Are we ready to leave now? I like to be fashionably late but this is just embarrassing. Jules, you look much better. Hopefully no one notices you wore that to the Animal Rescue Gala. Franklin, shall we?"

She waltzes over to my father, not paying any mind to Randall or the stranger in our foyer. Father takes her arm and they walk outside. Aunt Ina is quickly behind them.

“Jules, your family is leaving,” Randall says, snapping my attention away from Jameson.

I fall back with a shy smile. “Have a good evening,” I say and duck out the front door.

In the circular drive, about to get into the town car, I look up and see the sky filled with the rich colors of sunset. Still up there, hiding in the background, is the moon. I’m suddenly eager to see how beautiful it is when night falls.

The Party

THE MARCH SOIREE is the same as all the other galas, except tonight the tables are donned in crimson linens. The same band is playing the same songs. The same tea light candles and white orchids decorate the room. The same hors d'oeuvres are served, the same brand of champagne is being poured, and the same egotistical boys are in attendance.

"You're looking particularly lovely tonight." Gavin, a senior at my prep school has planted his feet beside mine on the side of the dance floor.

I don't need to look over to him to know that he is wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a striped tie, or that his nails are perfectly filed and his black hair is impeccably swept back

"Thank you. You look very nice yourself," I say, my eyes focused on the lead singer of the band. Her hair is dark and wild; untamed yet stunning.

"Don't I?" he agrees with a laugh to his voice. "I must say I'm disappointed. Your mother told me you were wearing champagne. I dressed to match."

I swivel my head over to him. My brows curve in. "Why would we dress to match?"

Mother, who has been engaged in conversation with her socialite friends, ignoring me for the past thirty minutes, has taken notice of Gavin at my side.

"Gavin LeGume, you look as handsome as ever." She and Gavin exchange double kisses which causes me to roll my eyes. "My apologies. Jules had a bit of an accident this afternoon and ruined her gown. I didn't have a chance to inform you."

He grins at her and holds up his blue tie toward my dress. "Gold and blue are the colors of royalty. Some things are fate."

Mother is looking at Gavin like he is the equivalent of all the stars in the sky. Makes sense since the LeGume family business is the second greatest importers of French goods in the United States. My father and Mr. LeGume have done a wealth of business together, boosting both their bank accounts exponentially.

I inwardly groan and look back and forth between the two. "Is there something I'm missing?"

She reluctantly turns her attention toward me. With a tilt of her head she says, "Gavin is your escort this evening."

I lower my gaze at her. "My escort?"

He steps closer, placing a hand on my lower back. "I would have picked you up but crew practice ran long today. I'm the Coxswain."

I mutter, "I'm sure you are."

"Jules," mother bites and then flashes her fakest smile to Gavin. "Why don't you two grab a glass of champagne."

"I'm only fifteen," I say to her.

"None for me, Mrs. Bradford. I'm driving. I'll have Jules home by midnight."

My head shoots to him. "Midnight?" Turning back to mother I say, "I'm not allowed to date let alone be alone in a car with an eighteen year old boy."

She leans in with a smile and a whisper, "Not all eighteen year old boys are LeGumes." Straightening herself out she offers, "Jules doesn't have a curfew so you two have a wonderful evening."

She walks away and I try my hardest to breathe out the annoyance my body is feeling. On the other side of the dance floor, three girls from my school are sneering at me.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks.

"I don't dance," I flatly respond.

Over his shoulder I notice his crew buddies gawking at us, pointing and laughing. They're probably in shock he's slumming it, on the side of the dance floor, with the school weirdo. The one who doesn't go to parties or roll up her skirt and actually pays attention in class. I sit alone in the courtyard, and eat my lunch, alone, with a book and the dream that once I graduate I'll go somewhere far away from here.

"You should go party with your friends," I offer.

With his hands in his pockets, he leans in and says, "I'd rather party with you. I'll tell you what, you don't seem all too comfortable here and I have a joint in my pocket that's dying to be lit up. Let's take a walk."

"I don't smoke."

"Then I won't either. We'll just talk."

I sway my head from side to side and think about his offer. Mother is gagging with her friends while my father is talking a little too intimately with a young waitress in a corner. The girls are still sneering and the boys

are still staring. With a shrug, I concede and allow Gavin to escort me across the room. He places a hand on my back and before we are through the door leading to the courtyard he glances over his shoulder and raises a fist in the air.

“Care for a drink?” Gavin pulls a flask out of his pocket when we’re outside.

“I thought you were driving?”

“I am.” He smirks and then points back toward the party, “I just said that to your mother to be a gentleman. She loves me by the way. Not surprised, all women do.” He lifts his mouth to the metal flask, takes a swig, then holds it out to me. “Whiskey?”

I stop walking. “I don’t drink.”

“You should.”

“I also don’t drive home with boys who drink.”

With a grimace he says, “Fair enough.” He twists the cap on and puts the flask back in his pocket. “What do you do?”

“Nothing you want to do tonight, that’s for sure.”

He narrows his eyes at me and then nods his head. We start walking again. The air is crisp for an early spring day.

“Next month I’ll be in Cabo for spring break. It’s gonna be epic. I think you’re the only girl from our school not going.”

“My father would never allow it.” I cross my arms in front of me.

“I bet your mother could convince him otherwise,” he says and I sigh at the notion that he’s probably right. My mother seems intent to whore me out to the first wealthy prospect. Most girls are being locked in their rooms, protected from being tainted by high school boys. Mine is practically giving them the key to my bedroom.

“We have our own villa,” he continues, “private chef, a pool that overlooks the ocean and a driver to take us to the clubs at night. All the rooms are taken, but you can stay with me. Clothing optional.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

“Then you should come to the going away party we’re having the night before. Everyone from school is going. You have to be there.”

“Parties aren’t really my thing.”

“That’s because you’ve never been to one,” he says and I can’t argue with that. Gavin stops walking and it takes a few steps for me to realize he’s

two steps behind. I turn around and face him. His hands are buried deep in his pockets. “All kidding aside, I would really like it if you came.”

“Why?”

“Because what else could you possibly have to do on a Friday night?”

It’s a rude thing for him to say but it’s true. Two years into my high school years and I’ve buried myself in books. The only socialization I have is from the lacrosse team. I also volunteer at a nearby animal shelter. Still, I assume I should try to be a typical high schooler. Even if it’s for just one night.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll go.”

We continue walking, I rub my arms to fight off the chill.

“My biceps are killing me after today’s practice.” He flexes his arm through his suit jacket.

“I thought the coxswain just sat there and yelled at the rowers?” It was a simple question and by the look on Gavin’s face, he does not appreciate it.

“It’s the most important job. I have to steer the boat and am constantly straining to yell direction to my crew. I make the race tactic calls, keep everyone motivated. They trust me to help them keep pace, and to really push them toward the end. You must have heard about our competition in Philadelphia.”

“No, I haven’t —”

“We won, obviously. There were college scouts there. It’s how I got my offer to Cambridge. I’m headed there in the fall. Rowing scholarship although I don’t need one. My parents can pay for any university I want. Same for you. Have you thought about where you want to go to school?”

I shake my head. “There are a few—”

“You shouldn’t worry about it. You’re going to work for your father when you get out of school. If you want to work that is.”

I open my mouth to counter his claim and ask why I wouldn’t work, but he carries on, “I’m definitely working for my family’s company when I graduate. Why wouldn’t I? Corner office is already waiting with my name on it. My dad thinks I’m going to college to study business so I’ll be ready to take over the company but I’m really just going to party. There’s plenty of years I’ll be stuck behind a desk. I may even stay for my masters just so I don’t have to start the nine to five.” He laughs and starts on a diatribe of all the facets of LeGume Imports.

As he talks, I look up. There are clouds in the sky. The bright light of the moon is shining behind the darkest of them all. I stare and watch, waiting for the cloud to move but it doesn't. The moon that waited all day to be seen is still being shadowed by its own environment.

Gavin talks, we walk, and while I should be listening, I can't help but dream about what it would be like to be up in the clouds.



Gavin sat next to me at dinner and carried on conversations with my father and his about their love of hunting and my father invited Gavin and Mr. Legume over for trap shooting. Mother and Mrs. LeGume planned a ladies day at the spa for us while Aunt Ina sat at another table casting weary glances my way.

I ate in silence and chimed in when asked a question, which was seldom. When the adults danced, Gavin stayed by my side. When his hand moved over to my thigh I excused myself from the table and told him I needed to use the ladies room. I locked myself in a stall and read from the kindle app on my phone until my mother came in looking for me. I claimed stomach issues and hoped she'd send me home in the town car.

Instead, she asked Gavin to bring me back.

"Is anyone home?" he asks when we pull up to the Manor.

"The night staff. They're probably asleep though."

Gavin parks the car in the circular driveway and turns off the ignition. I arch my brows in confusion. He leans in, his arm snakes across the back of my seat. "That was a slick move. Telling your parents you weren't feeling well. We have at least an hour until they come back. Maybe more."

I lean into my seat, away from his encroaching body. "You have the wrong idea."

With a wicked smile and a devilish look in his eye, he creeps in further, "I think I know exactly what you were getting at."

Putting my hands on his chest, I push him back, "I'm not interested."

His lips are so close to mine, his dark eyes studying me, trying to see just how serious I am. "Okay. I can take no for an answer." He leans back a little and I let out a breath of relief. "For now. I think you enjoy being chased and I enjoy the hunt."

I close my eyes in agony and wonder how in the world I garnered the unwanted affection of the boy who can have any girl. Just not this girl.

When I open my eyes, Gavin is no longer looking at me. Instead his eyes are wide, looking out the front window. “Who the hell is that?”

I turn and see, in the shadow of the carriage house, Jameson Brock looking at us with a face so stern and eyes so fierce. His hands are at his side, fists clenched and chest barreling out.

I swallow at the sight. “That’s our new mechanic.”

“He looks like a beast.”

I scowl at Gavin. “Why because he has a beard?”

“Because he’s about to attack.”

It’s an odd statement but he’s right. Jameson’s hair is haphazardly falling down his face. His arms look like they bathed in motor oil and his face is smeared in dirt. And with his broad frame he looks like he is about to pounce through the glass.

“I’ll walk you in.”

“No,” I say too quickly. “Trust me, I’m fine. You can watch me walk in if it makes you feel better.”

Gavin looks back at Jameson but doesn’t seem too sure. I open my car door and run to the front of the house before Gavin has a chance to follow. I open it and then wave him off, quickly closing the door behind me.

With my back to the door, I stand and wait to hear the car’s engine turn back on and leave down the driveway. When I am certain Gavin has left, I can’t help opening the door to peak out.

When I do, I see Jameson still standing by the carriage house, with his back to me, looking down the driveway. I lean further out the door, and watch as his fists unclench. The ocean air blows his hair around. He raises a hand and pulls the long tendrils back. With a nod, he takes a step then stops. Slowly, he turns around as if he heard his name being called and his gaze locks on mine. Those blue-green eyes that held my attention earlier today are now holding me captive.

My breath hitches. My body ignites in a rush of anticipation. I should be embarrassed for being caught staring at him but I can’t seem to close the door. Instead, I look back at the wild man who walked into our lives today. I haven’t spoken a word to him but for some reason I can hear his story. He’s a loner in need of a friend.

Can I be your friend? My soul asks him.

He closes his eyes and lowers his head. With a slight shake, he turns around and heads back to the carriage house.

The Carriage House

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The sound of rifles shooting causes me to cover my ears.

Father made good on his invitation to have the LeGume's over for trap shooting. Our property is large enough, they can launch their disks toward the ocean, and shoot them in the sky, without the town police giving them a citation.

Although, I doubt anyone would dare to give the great Franklin Bradford an issue at all. Based upon the sizable donation he made at the Police Benevolent Association Gala last Fall, I'd say he's clear for just about any crime, except murder.

"Squad ready?" the man at the machine that launches the clay targets calls out.

"Pull," Gavin says and the disk is released.

Boom! He smashes the clay disk out of the sky. After a bout of congratulations from the men, he turns to me and calls out, "Did you see that, Jules?"

From my spot under a tree, about twenty yards from where they're standing, I give a thumbs up. Mother and Mrs. LeGume carried on with their spa day. When I declined, my mother was fine with me staying behind, assuming I was going to spend time with Gavin. Really, all I wanted to do was read.

When I tried to go to my room, my father insisted I join them outside. I thought I'd be able to lose myself in the pages for a few hours but their damn guns are making my ears vibrate.

I lower my head and try to read when the process starts again.

Boom!

With a huff, I slam my book closed. I fill my cheeks up with air and blow out through my nose. My gaze travels to the other side of the great lawn to the carriage house. I look back at the men shooting their disks and then back to the carriage house.

For no reason at all, I stand and start walking across the lawn. As I get closer to the carriage house, my body begins to feel weighted, as if I'm being pulled in.

When I reach the side of the building, I hear music. It's loud, slightly angsty and has an edge. A man's voice is singing along. The voice is rough and a bit raspy.

I peer around the corner of the building and walk toward the open garage doors. Inside, Jameson is bent over the hood of one of Father's cars. His flannel shirt is wrapped around his jean-clad waist, his torso covered in a white tank top that's smeared in grease. Golden, tanned arms are ripe with muscle and bulging as he cranks something inside the car; the ripples in his back flex with the movement. The boys in my school are lean and athletic. Pretty prep school boys who have everything handed to them on a silver spoon. Jameson is a man who can fix things with his hands and works, out in the sunshine, and scares away guys, who try to make unwanted advances on girls, at night.

My fingers graze my lips as I stare at the way his hair falls in front of his face and his eyes squint in concentration as he works. His mouth is moving with the words to the song and if I could, I'd stand here all day and listen to it.

His head snaps up and his eyes widen slightly at the sight of me standing here.

I place my hand on the side of the door and walk toward him.

"Don't stop singing," I say.

He stands up and fiddles with the tool in his hand. His brows pulling, eyes averted to the floor. "Is there something I can help you with?"

I shake my head and walk in further. "What are you working on?" I say and then feel stupid for asking such an obvious question. "I mean, what's wrong with the car?"

He glances at the open hood and then back at me. "Engine."

"Oh. May I watch? I've never seen the inside of a car before."

He weighs the idea in his head momentarily and then answers, "Sure."

I take a spot on the opposite side, peering down. His mouth pinches in as he turns the crank.

"Do you need help?" I ask, causing him to pause momentarily.

"No."

I look at the red corvette he's working on. It's my father's latest purchase. One I heard him cursing about at dinner because no one knew how to work on it.

"How did you learn how to fix old cars?"

He answers with strained voice, not looking up. "Verdicts still out if I can fix this one."

"You don't know how?"

"I do," he says, exasperated. "I've done the same thing three times and it's not working."

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

He glares at me under a furrowed brow. "Are you saying I'm insane?"

With my book clutched to my chest I answer, "Technically Albert Einstein is."

Something about that statement causes him to drop his hand onto the side of the car and look away.

I step back and walk around the room. I'm never in the carriage house. Cars aren't something I've ever been interested in before. The floors are a shiny concrete and there's the distinct smell of rubber in the air. A door to a small office is on this side of the room, as is a spiral staircase in the back that leads to the room Jameson is currently living in.

"How is your room?" My hair twirls as I spin around.

He clears his throat and answers, "It's very nice."

"Why don't you have a place to live?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

I gnaw at my lip. "I'm curious."

His brows rise. "About me? Why?"

"You're interesting."

His fingers scratch beneath that coarse beard. "You're odd."

"I know," I sigh. "That's what everyone at school says."

He motions toward the open garage door. "Your boyfriend doesn't think so."

"He's not my boyfriend," I deadpan. "He's only here to kiss up to my dad."

"He was trying to do more than that last night."

"And I protected myself just fine."

Jameson lifts a rag from his back pockets and wipes his hands with it. With a shake of his head he answers, "Listen, kid, I have work to do. Why don't you go back to reading your book?"

With the rise of my chin I say, "I'm not a kid."

"Go," he demands.

“Why are you being so mean?”

“Because I want to work.”

“You can work with me—”

“Go,” he practically shouts.

I stomp my foot. “Have you remembered the step?”

“What step?”

“For the engine. Whatever it is you were trying to do before . . . You were missing a step. Now try again.”

With pursed lips, he thinks for a second and then lowers himself back to the engine. He moves something and then starts working again. After a minute, he stops. A bewildered expression crosses his face. He accomplished whatever the heck it was, that he was trying to do.

“You’re welcome,” I say and walk out of the carriage house.

What a pity. The most egotistical, yet boring boy in the world wants to spend time with me and the one person I find remotely interesting casts me away.



For three weeks, I’ve stayed away from the carriage house. It’s not that I’m intimidated by Jameson Brock. I just don’t care to be where I’m not wanted.

While I haven’t gone out of my way to see him, he tends to always be watching. When I get home from school, dressed in my long plaid skirt that falls below the knee, white button down and navy blazer, I feel his eyes on me. There he is, working on one of father’s cars in the cool April air.

Or when I’m on the great lawn, with my lacrosse stick in hand, lobbing the ball in the air, up and away, and then running and diving to catch it, he’s on the side of the building, hosing down equipment.

And when I take my walk along the beach, he’s out for his run, passing me on the sand, not making eye contact.

At night, I stand on the veranda of the Manor and look out to the Atlantic Ocean and stare at the stars in the sky. Usually, the sight is nothing but blackness, the only light is whatever the moon decides to give me.

These days, there’s a faint glow coming from the second floor of the carriage house. The room where Jameson Brock now resides, yet doesn’t want this ‘kid’ around.

He's probably just like everyone else. Ready to dictate what kind of life a 'girl like me' should be leading. Little does he know, I have so much more than they've got planned.

The Rescue Pup

“WHAT IN THE world are you doing?” Mother is shrieking.

“He was going to be put to sleep. I couldn’t just leave him there.”

I’m standing in the circular driveway with a ten-year-old golden retriever who is blind and can barely walk.

Mother steps down the front stairs, her hands on her hips, her voice shrill, “You will not step foot in this house with that mutt!”

Clenching the tattered leash in my hand, I can’t fathom why she would refuse to let such a kind creature into our home. “What do you suggest I do with him?”

“Take him back!” She says this like there is no other option.

“He’ll die.”

“Then good riddance.”

My tone is defiant. “Great, so when you’re old and senile I’ll just put *you* to sleep.”

She throws her arms up in exasperation. “I don’t know what to do with you anymore.” She points to the dog with a vengeful finger. “That thing is not coming inside this house and that’s final.” She stomps through the front door and slams it behind her.

I crouch down and run my fingers over the dog’s ears. “It’s alright, Buddy. I won’t leave you alone. If you’re not allowed inside then neither am I.”

I walk him over to the great lawn. He’s slow. Painfully slow. Today was my day to volunteer at the shelter after school. Buddy was brought in a few weeks ago, someone dropping him off because they couldn’t care for him any longer. The other volunteers run to the puppies and smaller dogs that look like puppies. Not me. I like the old, mangy mutts. The ones society casts aside because they’re not cute or perfect.

When I found out he was going to be euthanized, I filed adoption papers, grabbed his collar and walked him out of there. What a cruel thing to do to a dog. Just because he’s blind and no one wants him, doesn’t mean he should be killed. We won’t let terminally ill people, who want to die on their own terms, go in peace but society will so easily cast aside an animal because it doesn’t have a home. It’s just cruel.

Buddy and I take a seat under the shade of a tree. I lean my back against it, open my school bag and do my homework. The sun is bright today, the weather warm for spring, yet as the sun begins its descent, there's a chill in the air.

A little over an hour later, Randall, the house manager, appears. I watch him walk across the lawn in his brown suit, his arms held close to his sides. When he reaches me, he stands at attention. "Your parents have requested your company for dinner."

With a lift of my chin, I answer, "If the dog is not allowed to dinner then neither am I."

He casts a frown. "I was afraid you'd say that. Your mother is adamant the dog remains outside."

It's not like me to act defiant, but these days I'm finding myself acting more and more like my own person. "Then so do I."

"Miss Jules, you can't stay out here all night. You'll freeze."

"Watch me."

He looks pained as if the orders he's been given are not the ones he wishes to follow. "Your mother left explicit instructions that if you are not in the house by the time she goes to sleep she is locking the door and you are not to be allowed in."

My voice is calm as I state with the utmost conviction. "If she wants to keep me outside like an animal then that is how her daughter shall behave."

Randall slumps his shoulders and traipses back to the house. I pull my blazer in closer and continue with my homework.

A slight rush of excitement rushes up my spine. I've never done anything wrong. Sure, a typical teenager would be sneaking out of the house to party. This may not seem like the most rebellious thing for others to do; but for me, it's groundbreaking.

When the sun sets, I pull out my phone and read a book on my kindle. The night chill has set in but I'm fine. Randall walks me out a blanket, which I kindly accept and goes back to the house.

I place half the blanket over Buddy and we cuddle.

"You stink. Tomorrow, I'm sneaking you in for a shower," I tell him and I swear he nods in agreement. I have a bottle of water in my bag, which we share. My granola bar has chocolate in it so I give him my apple instead. He only eats a few slices before lying down and going to sleep.

We lay and listen to the waves crash. The winds are pushing in so I wrap the blanket tighter around us. My teeth begin to chatter. I snuggle closer to Buddy, relying on his warmth.

I shift my body to accommodate my aching muscles. I've been holding my body tight, protecting it from the cold, so much that my limbs become sore. Crawling into a fetal position, I huddle under the blanket completely and hold Buddy as tight as possible. The ground is colder than I expected. My body is shaky, my lips trembling. Exhausted from the internal fight, it doesn't take long until my lids become heavy and sleep overtakes me.



I wake to the bright sunshine and am in the comfort of Egyptian cotton sheets. My body is warm, yet my limbs are still aching from shivering so much.

Shivering.

Cold.

Something I am not.

I shoot up and push the covers off me. I'm in my uniform. In my bedroom. I don't remember coming in last night

"Buddy?" I call out but he's not here.

I rush out the room and down the hall, calling for my dog when I bump into Randall.

"You came in?" He sounds surprised to see me.

"Where's my dog?"

He shakes his head. "Where did you leave him?"

I run downstairs and out the front door. My dog is no longer under the tree where we were huddled last night. There is no way he could have survived on his own. He's too old and slow. I walk around the house three times looking for my dog, calling out his name. I run back to the lawn and under the tree. I check the pool area and even take a look down toward the beach. He's nowhere to be found.

I run up the back steps toward the veranda stopping midway to use the height as a vantage point. Buddy is nowhere to be seen.

"Damn it!" I yell and squeeze my eyes shut. I kick the wall of the stairwell so hard my big toe starts to throb. Hopping on one foot, holding

my other one in my hand, I spin in a circle and end up facing the carriage house. For some reason the scent of peppermint and musk overwhelms me.

It's not in reality. It's a memory.

Or was it a dream?

I may never know.

The House Party

LYING ON MY bed, my feet are propped up in the air as I study for a Geometry test. I tap my pencil on the paper, trying to solve a problem, when the doorbell rings. A moment later, my name is called so I rise from the bed, walk out to the hallway and peer down to the foyer. To my surprise, Gavin is standing with my father by the front door. The two look up when I appear.

“You ready?” Gavin asks causing me to scrunch my face in confusion. “The party. You said you would go.”

I forgot all about it. That’s not entirely true. I remember telling him I’d go but I hoped *he’d* forgotten all about it. I honestly never thought he’d show up at my doorstep to pick me up.

“I’m not dressed,” I say.

“I’ll wait,” he offers and I try to think of another reason why I can’t go. They are staring at me, probably wondering why I’m just standing here.

I shift my weight from side to side before finally conceding. “I’ll be down in five minutes.”

Throwing on a pair of jeans, a light blue sweater and chucks, I toss my hair in a low ponytail and put on some mascara and a lip-gloss. If the way the girls in my school hike up their skirts and undo the buttons of their blouses are any indication, I’d assume the girls at this party to be dressed as slutty as possible. I glance down at my sweater and wonder if I should put on something a little more . . . provocative.

I shake my head and erase the ridiculous thought from my head. When I get to the foyer, Gavin doesn’t seem disappointed in my attire and I find myself slightly relieved, which kind of bothers me.

The party is being held at a mansion three towns away. Gavin weaves his shiny black Porsche through the two-lane road that leads from one town to the next. When we get there, he parks his car in the front and hands his keys to the valet. Yes, this house party has a valet. Welcome to the world of Long Island rich kids.

I follow Gavin into the house and it is packed. Music is blaring and everyone from my high school, and quite possibly every high school in a twenty-mile radius, fills the rooms. Gavin grabs my hands and pulls me

toward the back. In the kitchen, his teammates cheer for him when he walks in. Their eyes widen at the sight of me. Jaws, from the girls in the room, drop when Gavin slings an arm around my shoulder. I stare at his hand on my shoulder but decide it's safer here under his arm than roaming alone.

He hands me a red solo cup. I take it and bring it to my lips. I know that if I don't drink they'll all just look at me like more of a freak than I am. I don't need to drink the whole thing. I just have to appear like I'm imbibing.

Gavin takes a cup for himself and downs it fast. There is a rap song blaring from a DJ in the living room. People are dancing, sweaty and practically falling all over each other. Girls are gyrating on speakers with their arms up in the air. Boys are gawking at the short skirts and low-slung tops.

"You feeling ok?" Gavin asks. His question surprises me. I never took him as the considerate type. It makes me smile. "You should do that more often."

"Do what?"

"Smile. It's pretty," he says and I can kick myself for actually liking the way he said that.

We walk into the dining room where there's a game of beer pong under way. He asks if I want to play but I decline. We leave and walk into a media room where there are a bunch of people playing on an Xbox, a few others lounging on recliners, watching and talking. There's a joint being passed around. Gavin walks over to the crowd and takes a hit.

"You want?" he offers, pulling in the smoke.

I shake my head, disgusted he's even asking since I told him last week I don't smoke. I take a few steps back and lean against the wall, as far away from the smoke as possible. Gavin passes the joint around and talks to the other smokers about baseball. One guy remembers me for playing lacrosse. I nod and start to reply but he gets a fit of the giggles and ends up rolling on the floor in hysterical laughter. My eyes are trained on the guy on the floor when a red object comes flying in the air and pelts me in the head.

"Ouch!" Raising a hand to my head, I acknowledge the plastic, red cup that is now lying on the floor.

With a cough, Gavin laughs into his fist. "I meant for you to catch that," he says as I rub my temple. "Can you get me another drink?"

Not one to be told what to do, I start to argue but quickly realize I don't want to be in this room getting high by association anyway. I pick the cup

up off the floor and make my way back toward the kitchen.

There are multiple couples making out in the hallway. A guy in just his boxers is dancing on the large entryway table, a group of onlookers cheering him on. Loud music has people shouting to hear one another. I shoulder past the crowd, narrowing my body and shifting to get back to where the kegs are.

“Jules!” My name is called. I turn to see Molly and Bethany from the team. “We thought you didn’t go to parties?”

“Decided to try something new,” I say, excited to see some familiar faces.

“We saw you walk in with Gavin LeGume,” Molly says with a sparkle in her eye. “He’s so hot.”

Looking over my shoulder in the direction of the media room where Gavin is currently getting high as a kite, I say, “We just drove here together.”

“Sure,” Bethany says with the word elongated for dramatic effect.

“I’m serious. He’s not my type.”

Molly squints her eyes at me before relaxing them and then saying, “Then stay away from the second bedroom on the left. It’s reserved just for him. He always takes his dates up there.”

“Oh my God, what is *she* doing here?” a girl shouts at me from the kitchen island. She hops down and comes stalking toward me.

I roll my eyes at the bitchiest girl I see daily in French class. “Hi, Brittany.”

“If I had known they were inviting trolls to the party I would have stayed home.” She raises her hands to her mouth and makes an announcement, “That’s it. Parties over. The air has been tainted.”

The fact that the music is loud and that she is slurring her words, are on my side. The level of mortification is bearable.

“Get a life, Brittany,” Molly says and it gives me an extra ounce of pride.

Brittany leans in toward me, white-blond hair falling over her dark eyes. “Nice sweater,” she breathes and then pours her half-filled drink down the front of my shirt. I jump back and look at the damage. My mouth is open wide but I have absolutely no words. Heat rises in my cheeks. I’m angry, so angry but the words aren’t forming. Instead, a well of moisture builds

behind my eyelids and, if I'm not careful, I'm going to burst into tears in front of everyone.

Two hands grab onto my shoulders and swing me around. I come face to face with Gavin. He looks down at my shirt and then up into my eyes. He doesn't say a word. He just pulls me toward him and out of the kitchen. Curled in the crook of his arm, he takes me down the hall and up the stairwell to the second door on the left. I would be concerned if it wasn't for the fact I am drenched and need to get away from people as quickly as possible.

"Give me your shirt. I'll throw it in the dryer," he says making my cheeks feel flushed at the idea of being topless in a room with a boy. "It's fine. You can hang in here while it dries." Turning round, he adds, "I won't look. Come on, it's this or you leaving here in a shirt drenched in beer."

I gnaw on my lip and contemplate the alternatives. I toss the sweater over my head and over to Gavin.

"Be right back," he says and then is out the door.

Taking a seat on the bed, in just my white bra, I slam my palm to my forehead. I am so dumb. Now I'm trapped, half naked, for at least forty minutes. I stand and rifle through the drawers in the room but they are empty.

Sliding my phone out of my back pocket, I call Randall and tell him I'm ready to come home. He says he'll send a driver immediately. When I ask him to bring me a shirt, any shirt, he doesn't ask questions.

The door opens and Gavin appears. His eyes immediately fall to the lace of my bra.

"Eyes up here," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. It's not like I have much of one for him to look at, but still.

Gavin plops onto the bed and pats the spot next to him. I shake my head, 'No,' but he just gives a devilish grin.

"I don't bite," he says.

"You're high."

"Doesn't mean I'm not completely aware of my actions. I am the one who rushed you here and is drying your sweater, aren't I?"

I cringe, my elbows rising high to my shoulders, and then sigh. Reluctantly, I take a seat next to him. No sooner am I sitting down, is his hand on my thigh.

I pop up off the bed. "Gavin!"

He pulls me down by my hips. As quickly as I am back on the bed, he rolls on top of me, his legs on either side of my hips, pinning me to the mattress.

“Jules,” he sing-songs. “Lighten up. We have time to kill.”

I try to wiggle away but he’s practically sitting on me. “This is not how I plan to spend it.”

His hands lean on my shoulders. “I told you I love the chase.”

My eyes widen, my heart races. My skin begins to crawl, the powerless feeling of being trapped beneath a man without the ability to move is overwhelming. Rage is building from deep in my belly. My hair is even standing on edge.

He lifts a hand and traces the outline of my bra.

I use the leverage to slam a right hook into his jaw. When he sits up to look down at me, I quickly sit up to jab my elbow in his crotch.

“You mother—”

I don’t stay to hear him finish that sentence for I am up and out the door as fast as lightening. I’m halfway down the stairs when I realize, by the stares of everyone in the foyer, that I am only wearing jeans and bra. A few people start cheering but I ignore them and run fast, pushing passed people as I bolt through the foyer and out the front door, down the steps and straight onto the gravel of the front driveway and into the barreled chest of a man wearing a flannel shirt.

Jameson.

He’s standing in front of the family town car. His eyes run over my body, seething at the sight of me in my bra.

“Jules!” Gavin yells from the front door. I turn and see him running towards me. He now has two friends following him.

Jameson pushes me behind him.

“Who the fuck are you?” Gavin says from his safe distance by the stairs.

“Are you the one who did this to her?” Jameson’s words are deep and loud.

Panic laces Gavin’s eyes as he notices the town car. He must have realized Jameson works for my father. He walks down the stairs, his friends in tow.

“I’ll bring her home,” he says, his hand outstretched toward me, but Jameson widens his stance. Gavin’s face pinches together. “Give her to me or I’ll have your job. You don’t know who you’re dealing with”

Jameson just stares down at Gavin. I can't see his face but from the way his back stiffens, the hardened muscles beneath his shirt becoming pronounced like he's ready to pounce, I know he is irate with anger.

I hear a small noise, something metal sliding against metal. I look over and Gavin's friend has a knife.

"Jameson!" I yell just as the friend reaches forward. Jameson moves away but not fast enough. The knife punctures him in the side.

"What the fuck?" Gavin yells at his friend.

Jameson falls forward, clenching his side. He grabs the knife and pulls it out of his side, looks at the blood dripping from the tip, then drops it on the ground.

The three guys look on in horror; their eyes round with shock.

"Grab the knife," Gavin yells. The friend takes his knife back and the three go running down the driveway.

Jameson looks like he's about to fall over. I place my hands on his biceps and move him toward the car, having him use it for stability.

I lift his shirt and survey the damage. Blood is dripping down his side.

"We have to get you to a hospital," I say.

"No. It's just a flesh wound." He starts to walk around the driver's side, his hand on the car for support, but he stumbles.

I run to his side and steady him again. "You need stitches."

He shakes his head, adamantly. "I can't," his words are no more than a whisper. The way he looks up at me with those blue-green eyes tilted down at the edges, the lines between them deeply creased, I know this is more than just not wanting to go to the hospital.

"Fine. But let me drive you home." I hold out my hand for the keys and he looks like he's about to argue so I add, "I can take care of you."

His face softens. The hard stance of his body relaxes. With a nod, he concedes. "Keys are in my pocket."

I blink at him a few times before I realize he can't put his hand in his pocket to get them because of the pain.

I slide my hand in his pocket. My fingers graze the hardness of his thigh and feel the heat searing through the fabric. I grab the keys and slide them out and then open the back door, ushering him into the back seat.

"Lie down, we'll be home soon."

The Rooftop

I KNOCK ON the door of Jameson's room and then turn the knob, letting myself in. "Hello?"

I'm half behind the door but I can hear the ruffling of sheets and then his grumbling voice. "You're supposed to wait for someone to say *come in* before entering."

With a dish in one hand, I push the door further open with the other. "Yeah, but you probably wouldn't have let me in," I say jovially, but the mood turns very serious when I am face to face with a half exposed Jameson Brock lying in his bed alone.

"Don't act bashful now," he says. "You stroll into a man's home unannounced, you have to suffer the consequences."

He is lying down, his head propped up by two pillows. His bare chest is on full display. He's only a few years older than me but he is all man. Thick muscle under tanned skin that's sprinkled with hair that leads down his stomach and under the thin sheet that is showing another muscle beneath the surface.

"Throw me that blanket," he motions behind me and it takes a second for me to avert my eyes from his waist.

I throw him the blanket. His biceps are corded, the veins running down his forearms. I'm watching those arms as he covers his lower body fully with the blanket.

I hold the plate up to him. "I brought you cake."

He cocks a brow.

Taking a seat on the bed, I uncover the foil and show him a piece of chocolate fudge cake and a fork. "It's my birthday."

"And you're bringing *me* cake?"

"There was an extra piece." I push it toward him and he takes it. I watch as he forks a piece. His tongue darts out in anticipation as he slides that sinfully delicious piece of chocolate into his mouth and lets out a groan at the heaven that is melting in his mouth. "Good, huh?"

"Perfect," he says and takes another bite. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

“Way to ring in your birthday,” he says. “Your boyfriend’s a real asshole.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” I say to him for the second time this week.

“Then why do you hang out with him?”

“I don’t. I just,” I start and then stop, wondering why I even went to that stupid party. “I thought it would make my dad happy.”

“You have a lot of growing up to do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He puts the plate on his stomach and looks up at me. “You’re naïve.”

“And you’re an assuming jerk.” I rise from the bed and turn around for a moment before looking back at him with a pointed glare. “For your information, that’s the first party I’ve ever been to. I don’t drink, don’t smoke, I don’t do drugs and I certainly don’t screw around with asshole boys. I knew enough to call Randall to come get me. If I knew he was sending you, I would have told him to leave me there with the wolves.”

A small smirk creeps over his face. “You’re feisty when you’re angry. Didn’t know you had it in you to curse.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

His gaze turns from me, down to the ground. “I haven’t been very nice to you, have I?”

“So far I’ve had two conversations with you and you’ve called me a kid and naïve. I may be sixteen but you’re only a few years older than me so stop acting like you’re so worldly. I bet you’ve never left the state.” My voice rises toward the end and by the way his brows rise slightly, and his mouth downturns, I know I hit the nail on the head. “Sorry. That was mean.”

“It was honest.”

“Honesty can be cruel.” I bite my lip and fiddle with the hem of my shirt when I hear a noise coming from the other side of the room. Craning my neck, I look over as a long-haired retriever slowly hobbles over.

“Buddy!” I fall to the floor and nearly burst into tears. Rubbing behind his ears I nuzzle the old dog, a huge smile on my face. “I was so worried about you. You were here the whole time?” I give him a good scratch, his head falling into my hands. He’s been on my mind for the last few days. I wondered if he was safe and here he was sleeping on the floor of the carriage house.

I look over to Jameson who is staring at me and Buddy with a look of melancholy. It takes me too long to realize that if Buddy is here then, “You carried me to my room.”

His quiet response is answer enough. We stare at each other, me kneeling by the dog, him from the bed.

“You were freezing. I . . .” He starts and trails off, “I know what it’s like to be out in the cold.”

I nod in understanding. “Thank you,” I say. “For me and for taking care of Buddy.” I rise and walk to the small bathroom to wash my hands. When I come back in, I take a seat on the bed and place my hand by the blanket. With my eyes, I ask him if it’s okay for me to pull it back to look at his injury. He pulls it down for me.

On his side is a large bandage made of gauze and medical tape. “It’s soaked through.” On the end table is a first aid kit. I grab it and open an alcohol wipe and more supplies to make a bandage.

When I brought him back last night, I found the kit in the carriage house. I did the best I could to clean him up. Looks like the patient hasn’t been doing a good job at taking care of himself.

I clean the wound causing Jameson to curse through his teeth.

“You need stitches,” I say as I apply the fresh bandaging. “You want to tell me why you won’t go to the hospital?” He looks reluctant to say anything. I lower my gaze and give him an answer honestly, “I can keep your secrets.”

His chest rises and falls. The deep hue of his eyes take me in, reading me to see if I am worthy of his truth. “I ran away a long time ago and I don’t want to be found.”

I want to say so many things, ask many more questions but I don’t. I know I should be honored with that little bit of honesty. He seems to appreciate it.

“Jules,” he whispers and I look up to him. “Thank you, for saving my life.”

“Looks like we’re here to save each other.”

He smiles and it’s absolutely beautiful.

When he’s all cleaned up, I look around the room. “There’s not much to do in here. Father didn’t even give you a television?”

“It is pretty lonely. Well, not so much since I got the dog.”

“His name is Buddy and, let’s be honest, he’s not much company.” The dog’s ears perk up when I say that. “No offense, Buddy.”

Jameson laughs and it’s even more beautiful than his smile. “I was enjoying a book but its a little difficult now. I can’t get into the right position to hold it open with one hand.”

On the other side of the bed is a paperback that is lying open, about halfway through. I lift it and see he’s reading *Beauty and the Beast*, the original version. It’s an interesting selection but I don’t tease him about it. Instead I ask, “May I read it to you?”

“Don’t you have other things you’d rather do on your sixteenth birthday?”

It doesn’t take me more than a second to answer, “No.”

He surprises me when he grins and replies, “Then, yes. Read to me.”



“Hey Jameson.” As soon as I step out of the town car, I practically skip over to where he is inside the carriage house.

He startles as I walk in, obviously surprised by my stopping by. He glances down at my uniform, from the bow around my neck, down to my kneehighs and black flats.

“How was school?” he asks, and then clenches his teeth while gripping his side.

I drop my backpack on the floor and take the wrench out of his hand.

“You need to sit down.” I try to guide him toward a chair but he doesn’t budge.

“I can’t. If your dad sees me like this I’ll be fired.”

“You saved me from those guys. I’m not ashamed to tell him what happened.”

Jameson bites down, his jowls protruding. “You have to promise never to say anything. If you think for one second he’ll take my side over theirs you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Why wouldn’t he believe you?”

“Look at me?” he practically growls, so I look at him. From the mangled dark hair at the top of his head, to the beard that grows along his face. He’s built like a tank and he holds himself like he’s always on the

defensive; an animal on guard. Yet, behind this hardened exterior, the oversized clothes and the facial hair, is a beautiful man with high cheekbones and a handsome nose. He has a full mouth and a strong jaw, not to mention the kindest eyes I've ever seen.

I take his hand. It's rough and calloused. Running my thumb over his palm, I look up into his eyes and say, "I am."

I lift the wrench that's in my other hand. "Show me what you are trying to do. I'll help you until your side heals."

He's looking at me but something shifts in his gaze. His face softens and those blue-green eyes simmer. His chest relaxes and a tiny smile tugs on his mouth.

"I'm going to teach you how to repair a carburetor."



"Tell me about Paris."

Jameson's question nearly causes me to fall off the chair. I'm sitting at the desk inside the carriage house watching him work. I've been coming straight in here every day after school for two weeks. At first it was because he needed the extra hand. Now I just come here because I like it.

Usually, I am the one telling him all about my day. Whether it's exams, practice or even some school gossip, something I usually don't care for, but it gives me something to tell him. If I ask him a question he always answers but this is the first time he's instigated the conversation.

I close my history book and swivel the chair toward him.

"It's romantic, not that I know anything about romance." I can't help but get a little starry-eyed when I think of the city I adore. "You have this city with incredible old world architecture and a history that's still very much alive. You can sit in a café while reading a book and gaze up at the Eiffel Tower or take a walk across the bridge over the Seine and look over at Notre Dame Cathedral. There are neighborhoods packed with impoverished artists and writers and there are others lined with high-end fashion boutiques. You can spend the night at a shadowy jazz club and let's not forget about the food. The cheese. The wine—"

"The wine?" he says with a smirk.

I hate when he says things that remind me I'm younger than him. But I know what he means. "My mother lets me have wine when we visit."

“You travel a lot?”

“Three times a year. All over the world really. This year we went to Vail to ski and in a few weeks we’ll be headed to Barcelona. Hopefully, we’ll be in Paris for Christmas.” I can feel my face brighten with the memory.

“What about you? Where have you been?”

A flush creeps across his cheeks. “I’ve never left the state.”

I suddenly feel like the biggest fool. A pretentious fool. Even though I live at the Manor and he resides in a small room with no kitchen, I try my hardest not to appear above him. Because I’m not. Yet, I don’t know how to show him. I ruminate, trying to think of something interesting to say.

“The Northern Lights,” he says, causing me to look up at him with an interested expression. “If I could go anywhere it would be to see the Northern Lights.” He leans his hip against the side of the car and crosses his arms. He looks so sexy when he does that.

Wait. *Did I really just say that to myself?*

He continues, “They have these igloos you can sleep in. You sleep under a fur blanket and look out the glass roof at night. Talk about romantic. I can’t think of anything more alluring than gazing at the night sky filled with enchanting lights.”

He’s staring off in a dreamy state as I just stare at him. The way his ankles are crossed and how his teeth graze his lower lip. He does it when he’s concentrating while working or right before he eats. Now I know he does it when he thinks about something he really wants.

“Can I show you something?” he asks and I nearly jump out of my seat.

“Yes,” I say too eagerly. “I mean, of course. What is it?”

He rises and takes a step toward me. His face turns serious. “You have to promise not to tell a soul.”

I practically sigh. “I promise.”

He grabs my hand and walks me through the carriage house and up to his room. My heart races at the thought. I’ve been in here before. Only that one time when I brought him cake and read to him in bed, but this time it seems more thrilling.

He releases my hand and walks though the room, to the back window, opens it and steps out onto the ledge. Looking back in, he holds out a hand out.

I take it and follow him outside. The ledge is very wide and big enough for the two of us. Against the side of the building is an iron ladder. He

guides me to go first, so I do. Taking the ladder slowly, I ascend the building and climb on shaking legs. When I reach the top, I climb over the railing and onto the roof.

The view is stunning. The ocean stretches for miles before us. Salt and brine permeates the air and the crashing waves sound magnificent.

Jameson climbs over the rail and walks to the middle of the roof where an old telescope stands. I follow and take a look in the scope. All I see right now is graying sky.

“Why did you bring me up here?” I ask, my hair blowing in my face.

He takes the stray hair and tucks it behind my ear. The smell of peppermint and musk is thick. “I wanted to share with you something I love.” With his hand still on my face, he looks up. “The stars. They’re all I have. At night, when the stars light up the sky, I feel at home.”

His hand falls and he pinches his lips, his brows crease. I stand and wait because I know that Jameson doesn’t open up to anyone. I had hoped it would be me.

“I don’t remember my parents. I was raised in foster care since I was three. I wasn’t one of those kids who sat by the window and waited for my parents to claim me. I knew that was never going to happen. I lived many places. There were many good families along the way, but no one was able to keep me for too long. The last family to have me, they weren’t very good to me. That’s when I ran away and don’t care to be found. My childhood was erratic but there was one constant. The stars. I learned to map them and follow them as the years passed. I talk to them sometimes.” He seems embarrassed by this last admission, but I just smile.

“That’s no different than wishing on them.”

He blushes. “Anyway, I just thought you’d like to see what’s up here.”

“It’s perfect,” I say and I mean it. “Jameson?”

“Yes, Jules.”

“Does this mean we’re friends?”

He smiles, and I find myself smiling as well.

“Yes. You’re my only friend.”

I’d be lying if it didn’t make my heart nearly burst.

The Fire

THE CLOCK ON my nightstand says it's after two in the morning. With heavy lidded eyes, I blink and try to figure out why in God's name I am up in the middle of the night. I roll over and bury my head under my pillow and lull myself back to sleep.

"Over here."

I bolt up in bed. The sound of someone talking outside my window has me pushing the covers off and rushing toward the window. At first, I see nothing but blackness as I peer down toward the side of the house. I wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and continue to look out the window. Nothing is out of the ordinary.

Turning around, I walk toward my bed then stop at the foot of it. Biting my nail I try to decide if I am hearing things in my sleep or if there really was a voice outside. I walk back to the window, open it and look out again. There's a breeze in the air that is making the trees whistle. That's probably what it was. Just a case of whistling trees.

I put my hands on the frame to close the window when I see a shadow running toward the carriage house. I lean out further to get a good look. There's another shadow. The blue and gold of a Prep School crew jacket comes into view. On the back, the name LeGume.

My feet move quickly across the room. I'm down the hallway and on the stairs as fast as I can. I don't know why Gavin and his friends would be at the carriage house but it can't be good.

I have to warn Jameson.

My sockless feet pound against the cobblestone of the driveway. The air is cold but my sleeveless arms don't feel a thing because my adrenaline is raging.

With a racing heart I run toward the carriage house and slam into someone running in the opposite direction.

I fall, hard, on my ass and before I can even register the pain, I look up and see Gavin staring down at me. His eyes are wide, frightened. His mouth opens and he looks like he's about to piss himself when someone yells, "Let's get out of here!"

Gavin falters for just a second before running as fast as he can down my driveway and away from my house. I watch him run, no idea what in the world he could be running from.

Suddenly, a bright light appears from inside the carriage house. I look over and see the glow of orange coming from the garage area.

Fire.

I'm on feet and rushing toward the flames. As soon as I open the door, I see the fire that was ignited on the far end of the room. I do a quick look for an extinguisher, following the opposite walls looking for the telltale red canister. I check the back locker, on the desk and near the bathroom. I even look under one of Father's cars. I pull at the ends of my hair unsure of what to do. The fire is growing, climbing the sidewall of the building.

The air is getting thick and the smell of burnt matter is strong. I run up the stairs and toward Jameson's room. I bang on the door.

"Jameson!"

I don't give him a chance to answer. I open the door and practically fall in. The lights are off, the bed is made. He's not here.

The roof.

I sprint across the room, out the back window and up the ladder, scaling the side of the building. When I reach the top, I let out a breath, not out of relief but because I realize I've been holding it. Now, my lungs can't seem to get enough air. My breathing is erratic. My chest burns.

He's not up here.

I turn around and climb down the ladder. My hands are so shaky, I talk to myself the whole way down, making sure I keep a steady grip.

When I'm through the window, I can feel the heat from the fire traveling up here. The glow of flames growing from the other side of the door. The air is thickening with black smoke. It's getting harder to breathe. Walking back through the garage is no longer an option. It's two stories high, but I'm going to have to jump out the window.

My foot is on the ledge, about to crawl back out through the window when a whimper draws my attention to the floor by the bed. I climb down and fall to the floor.

"Buddy," I pull on his collar and try to get him to stand. "You're gonna have to get up, boy." He lifts his head and then falls back to the ground.

"Please, you have to get up. I can't leave you," I cry.

I go to lift Buddy but have to stop when a coughing fit strikes me. My throat is burning as the air is pulled up through my gut. It passes so I slide my arms under Buddy and pick him up.

I take a step but his weight is too much. I stagger back. Sweat drips down the side of my face. My shirt is drenched and my forearms are feeling like jello. My strength begins to wane and so does my head as lightheadedness overwhelms me. The room begins to spin. I take another step forward. A step to the side.

Sweating.

Spinning.

I can't breathe. I can't see. I can't hold on.

I can't . . .

The Homecoming

“YOU GAVE US quite the scare, young lady.”

I open my eyes to the sight of Aunt Ina sitting by my bed, a cup of tea in hand.

My head is pounding and my mouth feels like I’ve swallowed sandpaper.

“Water,” I mouth and she pours me a glass. Someone rushes over and holds my back as I take a sip. I look over and see a woman in white pants and a white top assisting me.

“Your father has had this place running like a twenty-four hour hospital. The doctor has been in quite a few times,” Aunt Ina says.

I sit back and look around my room. Everything looks the same, minus the nurse and a table nearby with some medical supplies.

“The fire.” I remember being in Jameson’s room and trying to get Buddy out.

“You’re very lucky that boy was there to save you. Jumped out the window with you in his arms. He even went back for the dog.”

“Buddy’s alright.” A wave of relief washes over me. “Who was there? Who got us out?”

“The boy with the beard. The one your father hired to fix the cars.”

A laugh escapes my lips. Jameson saved me.

“What on Earth were you doing in the carriage house? We’ve all been in a fit of worry. You’ve been sleeping for nearly two days, you know? And the carriage house is ruined. Fire department got the flames out but it needs to be rebuilt. Investigators said it was gasoline spread across the floor.”

I reach for my throat, recalling how strong it burned from the smoke. I can still feel the heat on my skin from the flames. “I know who set the fire. It was Gavin. I saw him.”

She grabs her chest. “Are you sure? But he’s such a nice young man. Your father thinks the world of him.”

“It was him. I swear. He’s not a good person. I need to talk to my father.”

She tsks. “That is a shame. I think he wanted to blame it on that young man. The one who saved you. Blames him for carelessness.”

“No!” I say too loudly, causing me to flinch at the pain in my throat. “Jameson would never do something like that. He’s good. And kind. A hard worker. He’s my friend.”

Aunt Ina’s eyes light up. A small smile tugs on her lips. She puts her cup down and pats my arm. “You don’t need to tell me that. I can see with my own eyes. He’s been in a bit of a fit about you, too. He doesn’t say anything but he’s been hanging out just outside your window. Hasn’t left since he carried you out of that building. If you ask me, I’d say he’s quite smitten with you.”

“We’re just friends.”

“It’ll have to stay that way. There’s no way your father would let you be with a boy like that. Beside, you’re too young. When you’re older maybe, but right now you need to keep to yourself.”

I blush thinking of how I’ve admired Jameson in a way that friends don’t look at each other. But Aunt Ina’s right. I need to just remain his friend. Anything more would only cause Jameson to lose his job. And in this case, his home.

“Where is he living?”

“Randall took him in. They’re sharing a room until the carriage house is remade. Now, you just rest.” She adjusts my blankets and settles me in some more.

“Thank you, Aunt Ina.” My head falls further back into the pillow.

She stands from her chair and walks toward the door. With her hand on the frame, she turns and looks at me. Her eyes filled with wonder. “You know, sometimes the unlikeliest friendships turn into something more.” Motioning for the nurse, she walks out of the room with the nurse following behind.

I close my eyes and allow myself to dream about what a life of *more* could be like.



A creak of the door wakes me up from my sleep. Expecting the nurse, I roll over. Instead of seeing the nurse, I am greeted with the tender, bashful smile of Jameson Brock.

My cheeks stretch as far as they can. My smile is so big at the sight of my hero.

“Don’t talk. The doctor said you should rest.” He’s wearing a blue sweater and a pair of jeans. He must have borrowed them from Randall.

“Your aunt let me up, said I could sit with you for a while.” He leans over and rubs a thumb along my forehead. “I was so scared.”

“Of the fire?” I ask.

“For you,” he states. His teeth skim his lip as he continues to rub my head. “I was on the beach watching the stars when I saw the fire. It must have been fate because I arrived just as I saw you climbing out the window. I nearly died when I saw you go back in. I knew you went back for Buddy. It took me forever to get to you.” His voice is shaky and his eyes are glassy in the dark. “I thought I’d lost the one person I look forward to seeing every day.”

My heart beats wildly. My limbs may feel like jello, but it’s my head that is completely mushed. “You’re a good man, Jameson Brock. I’m honored to call you mine.”

His face lights up momentarily before his forehead pinches in. “Yours?”

“My friend,” I state and I know Aunt Ina is right. Even though I know that for the rest of my life I will be unequivocally in-love with Jameson Brock, I can’t do anything about it. Not today at least.

Lifting the book in his hand he says, “I thought maybe I could read to you.”

“I’d love that more than anything,” I breathe.

His blue-green eyes sparkle. He leans over and turns on a lamp beside my bed. Taking a seat on the chair beside me, Jameson opens the book and starts to read, just as I did when he was injured in his bed.

His voice is low, the tone deep and sinfully soothing. “Beyond the gates and along the path that winds to the castle is trail of the most lush roses he had ever seen. He had never seen anything as beautiful as the red tips of the petals. The blooms flourishing in the graying sky.”

He’s midsentence when I place my hand on his knee. He stops reading for a moment as he looks at my hand on him. With a small smile, he places his hand on mine and then continues reading.

As his words drift softly into the night, I glance out the window and see the moon. It’s large and bright, so beautiful and strong in it’s stage. I knew when it was time it would shine bright. I just didn’t know I would love it so much.

Read the next act in Jules and Jameson's love story at
www.jeanninecolette.com

About the Author

Jeannine Colette is the author of the Abandon Collection – a series of stand-alone novels featuring dynamic heroines who abandon their reality in order to discover themselves . . . and love along the way. Each book features a new couple, exciting new city and a rose of a different color. She lives in New York with her husband, the three tiny people she adores more than life itself, and a rescue pup named Wrigley.

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every beautiful piece

A.M. Johnson

A TALE OF a beastly storm that traps a doctor and his secretary in the basement of the hospital they work in—and what happens when old wounds are torn apart and two pasts collide.

Every Beautiful Piece

A.M. Johnson

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CHAPTER ONE

EVANGELINE BELL WAS always good at being invisible, at least, that's what she told herself. Ever since grade school, she always fell beneath the radar, every little nuance, every little shimmer, she quelled with her silence, her shyness, with her inability to raise her head and meet a stranger's eyes. Tonight was no different. The operating room was busy, the heavy storm that had blown in from the coast was creating waves in the streets, nearly impassable, the on-call nurses had muttered to each other as they'd removed their raincoats and headed to the locker rooms earlier that evening. Evangeline, as usual, kept her head down through all the commotion. Her job as an OR clerk offered little disturbance to her solitary way of life. She wasn't obligated to talk to anyone beyond the capacity required of her title on most nights and that suited her just fine.

She continued to put the charts together with ink-stained fingers. She'd been forced to use the "old beast" to stamp patient labels and wrist bands, because just her luck, the printer had finally given way to its last breath tonight. The sleek and modern printer the office manager had purchased last week hadn't been delivered yet. The "old beast" was loud enough it'd given her a headache every time she lowered the heavy stamping mechanism down onto the paper. The roll inside stamped patient information with only a little bit of black smudging around the edges of the paper.

"Dr. Prince is finished in OR one. He's washing up and scrubbing in to help Dr. Lance in OR two, is the chart ready?" Cherry, one of the nurses on-call, had just arrived not twenty minutes ago, looking bright and happy, her voice and smile never dampened by the mood of the room or even Dr. Prince.

Dr. Lucas Prince was more of a beast than the old labeler, Evangeline thought to herself as she placed the last consent form into the chart. She snapped the three rings closed and handed it to Nurse Cherry with just a nod of the head.

"One of these days, Eva, I'll get you to tell me all of your secrets." Cherry smiled and Eva did, as well.

"Maybe," she teased just as the lights flickered with a large boom of thunder.

“Dear God, at least we have generators, this storm is the worst we’ve had in years.” Cherry’s pink cheeks didn’t dim with her assessment of the weather.

Cherry was right though, the nor’easter was whipping through Cape Ann and Rockport faster than anyone had prepared for. Essex County was neither a stranger to these types of storms, nor were its residents, but Eva had just moved into her apartment this summer, and she was still adjusting. October was cold enough already, without the wind, rain, sleet, and possible snow. She shivered at the thought as she eased back into her chair, and flicked her eyes to the clock. Three more hours of this shift and she would have to brave the walk home. It was only a mile, and in normal circumstances, the walk from County Central Medical Center was actually her favorite part of the day. No doctors to answer to, no nosy nurses trying to wheedle their way into her life. Just miles of starlit sky to gaze into on her stroll through the small-town streets. Tonight she’d brought an umbrella and a thin windbreaker. She turned her head to watch the wind beat the ice against the waiting room window and sighed. It was going to be a long mile home.

It shouldn’t bother him, death was death. Sometimes there wasn’t anything anyone could do to pay that debt back to the universe. There was no price that could be paid to the gods, to God... to death, when He came for you. Most doctors, especially surgeons, didn’t think like this. But he knew better. He’d seen his own death, hers... theirs. Lucas looked at himself in his locker mirror. His blue eyes had a burst of green around the pupils that appeared more evident in the low light, the dark circles that underlined them were proof enough to his colleagues that maybe he should’ve called it a day on trauma number two. But it wasn’t his fault. People die. Everyone died at some point.

He raised his hand to the breast pocket of his green surgical scrubs and used the pad of his thumb to trace the outline of Rose’s picture.

Everyone dies... and there wasn’t a damn thing any of these cocky fucks could do about it. He slammed his locker shut as the thought roared in his head.

“Prince, they need you in OR two.” John, one of his friends, a scrub tech, the only one he really trusted around here, stood in the doorway looking at Lucas with weary and tired eyes. Eyes that mirrored his own.

This damn night... this storm.

It seemed there was no end in sight.

“I’ll be right there.”

John nodded and cleared his throat before he winced and said, “Maybe just scrub in for an hour, you look wasted and I heard—”

“The man was dead when he got here, the car practically crushed him.” Dr. Lucas Prince narrowed his eyes at John, begging, daring him. Lucas’s jaw clenched—the muscle feathered under his skin—his shoulders were edged and ready for the argument.

Say it. Say what you want to say. I was distracted, tired... say it.

John just nodded.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Okay.” John didn’t look back at Dr. Prince as he left.

He’d scrubbed in for thirty minutes, and it was all that had been needed to help fix the mess his new associate had made of a simple appendectomy. Now, Lucas lingered under the heat of the water letting the steam in the shower fill the empty space of the locker room. Everyone had already headed home to their families. The storm was only expected to get worse, no one wanted to linger, no one but him. Lucas had showered and dried off before the steam had evaporated. He could have easily showered at home, but the weather worried at his gut, threatening memories that needed to be kept silent, at least until he was home, and in the cool dark of his own space. His fingers began to shake as he buttoned up his shirt. The gnarled and raised pink flesh of his chest, his arms, his scars... the burns were all hidden beneath the stiff, white cotton. The phantom pain spread along his skin as the material rubbed against him.

He closed his eyes and the bright orange flames of the past consumed him as the wind hammered against the walls of the hospital. The sound of the sleet scraping along the skylight above him caused a shudder to run down his spine. Dr. Prince allowed his eyes to open, allowed himself to forget it all as he grabbed the dirty surgical scrubs he’d worn all day and

threw them into the soiled linen bag. He didn't waste any more time in self-pity as he donned his jacket and grabbed his bag.

The walk to his SUV wasn't too far, he was a doctor, and had front row parking, but as he walked through the locker room door, the exhaustion hit him. The girl at the nurse's station had her head down in a book, as usual. Her dark brown hair curtained her face as he walked by. He was grateful for her shyness, her awkward sociability, he didn't like talking to people unless it was necessary. After everything, after that one tragic night, people had lost their luster. And life, it was just something he did to get by, to move on.

"Goodnight, sir, stay safe out there." Her voice, too soft, too feminine, stopped him mid-stride.

He almost kept going, almost ignored her as always, but instead he turned and looked at her. Her brown eyes were big but obscured behind black-rimmed glasses that had slid down her slim nose. She wore red scrubs, the color reflected in her cheeks, and instead of looking down, she was staring right at him with parted lips. Waiting...

He swallowed as he shifted his gaze to hers. "You, too."

She didn't smile, but something eased in her shoulders as she said, "Thanks."

A large crash of thunder sounded and he exhaled a rough breath. The walk to his car would be brutal. He didn't smile either as he turned to leave, didn't say goodbye as he walked out of the OR waiting room. He didn't give the secretary behind the desk another flicker of thought as the frozen air hit his face. The wind shredded through his coat, and as the wet slush gathered at his collar he broke into a jog. By the time he reached his car, the sleet had turned to snow. Lucas's pants were damp, and his dress shoes ruined as he climbed into the front seat of his SUV. The snow poured in before he slammed the door. His hands shuffled through his bag as he searched for his wallet and keys. First, he turned the key in the ignition and cranked the heat. Then, like every night, he opened his wallet to look at her. To say sorry again, to ask her—them—for forgiveness. Tonight, maybe he'd ask for protection, too.

His heart skipped. His stomach churned, and a pained and angry growl erupted from his lips as he realized what he'd done. How had he forgotten? It was this storm, this fucking storm... Her picture was missing, its home inside his wallet empty.

Rose.

He'd left her picture in his scrub pocket... the scrubs he'd dumped into the dirty linen.

CHAPTER TWO

HE HARDLY NOTICED the chill in his bones, or how his clothes stuck against his skin, soaked and lined with ice at the sleeves as the hospital doors slid open. The halls were practically empty as he ran toward the elevators. Lucas was panting, his heart beating so hard it was next to impossible to breathe—to pull oxygen into his lungs. The shy girl was no longer at the desk, and he thanked the universe for small favors as he blew through the locker room doors with no time for pleasantries.

“No,” he whispered in a panic as he lifted the lid to the dirty linen. It was empty. A fresh bag in its place.

There was nothing to search through, but still Lucas reached in, cursing loudly. The anxiety in his chest choked him as he picked up the linen cart and threw it against the wall. He roughly ran his fingers through his hair and looked around the room. Nothing. He moved quickly as he checked the shower rooms, and his locker just in case he’d left it in there... no picture. Lucas’s thoughts turned dark. *How did he let this happen? He was so stupid, too distracted, it was the last happy memory he’d had and he threw it away. He threw her away.*

His throat began to close off, and the burns on his chest, his arms, they smoldered beneath the surface. And the pain he was feeling in his heart, it fed the flame that was blazing across his flesh. The soaked shirt he wore did nothing to stop the ache. He was turning to leave when the locker room door opened.

The girl in red scrubs gasped as she took in the doctor. His disheveled appearance was wild with fury deep in his sea glass eyes. She dropped the paper towels she had in her hands, and brought her shaking fingers to her lips.

She laughed nervously as she said, “You scared me.”

She dropped her gaze when Lucas didn’t immediately address her. He looked at the paper towels scattered on the floor, and the panic eased enough for him to think—to speak.

“Where did you put it?” he asked. His voice was low, pitched with anger and accusation.

“W-what?” she stammered and it only served to annoy him further.

“The linen? You cleaned? Where is the soiled linen bag from earlier?” Each question was a contained growl.

The young woman’s shoulders rolled in, her posture shrinking as she said with a furrowed brow, “I sent it down the shoots, sir.”

His jaw pulsed as he tried to breathe, tried to control his temper. After all, this woman had no idea, it wasn’t her fault that he’d been so careless. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Show me.”

Her head lifted on his command, and her lips dipped at the corners. “The shoots?”

He nodded. “I forgot something... I need to find that linen bag.”

They walked in a silent rush to soiled holding room. The doctor’s anger was spilling and splashing in the space between them. Evangeline tried not to notice how sad he seemed under the surface of his rage. She tried not to notice how his eyes seemed to fill with tears and then burn away a second later with fury. Eva definitely didn’t want to notice how handsome Dr. Prince was, or how his dress shirt was wet. How it clung to the muscle of his chest, or how his dark hair dripped into his blue eyes making him look younger... softer, somehow. She shouldn’t be thinking about any of those things, not while he regarded her with murder in those sad eyes.

She opened the door and pointed. He brushed past her and just stared at the two silver shoot doors. One was marked Rubbish, and the other Linen.

“Where’s the bag?” he asked, barely able to speak through his clenched teeth.

“I told you, I put it down the shoots.” She lifted her finger and directed him to the small metal door marked Linen.

His hands balled into fists, his patience was gone the minute she’d said “you scared me” in the locker room. He glared at her. “Down where?”

She wondered how a doctor who had worked here for so many years had such little knowledge of how things worked. But, then she took in his dress slacks and shiny shoes and realized that doctors don’t take out the trash or clean up the locker rooms.

“To the basement. All five floors have shoots. All five floors at the end of the night send down their linen and trash. If you lost something in that bag... I’m sorry to say it’s probably gone.” She spoke with more snark than

she was used to, but as Dr. Prince's face fell—crumpled was more accurate of a word—her heart stammered.

"Gone," he said too quietly for the rigid set of his shoulders. He scrubbed his hands down his face, and once his eyes found hers again they were vacant, void of any feeling.

"We could find it," she offered, and took a tentative step toward him. "The bag could be on top of the pile?"

He shook his head.

"It could." She tried again. "If it's that important it's worth a shot." The confidence in her tone caught his attention.

A shadow crossed his features as he stood straighter, to his full height, as if her words had awoken something inside of him again. "It's worth everything."

"Then follow me."

The elevator was too small to contain this man and all the worry that was radiating from him. The air felt warm and thick as Evangeline swallowed down an uneasy breath. She peeked at the doctor out of the corner of her eye. She could make out his large form in her peripheral view. He had to be over six feet tall, he seemed giant compared to her small, five-foot-one frame. Eva fiddled with a string at the end of her long-sleeved undershirt as the elevator dinged counting down each floor. He didn't speak, and Eva didn't think she'd be able to anyway, so she was grateful for the small reprieve. In just a few minutes they would be knee deep in dirty sheets, towels, scrubs, and who knew what else. She just hoped there were gloves available in the linen room since she'd been too nervous to remember to bring some of her own.

The elevator doors opened to a brightly lit hallway, and as they stepped out into the cool, damp air, goosebumps skittered down her spine. A loud crack of thunder echoed all the way down into the basement. Evangeline jumped as the lights flickered and then went out. She stumbled backward with a small squeak and hit a wall of a human. The doctor's hands gripped her shoulders and held her steady as the generator lights popped on, illuminating the hallway in an eerie yellow glow. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom, and for a brief second, the warmth of Dr. Prince's hands was welcomed.

"I hate basements," she whispered. As if her voice reminded him he wasn't alone, he dropped his grip letting the chill in the air curl around her

once again.

“Shit.” The doctor turned back to the elevator and pressed the up arrow. When it didn’t light up immediately he began to press it over and over again. “Shit.” He repeated as his thumb jabbed at the button.

“Power is out, but don’t worry...” Despite her own fear, her lips split in a smile as she said, “The stairs are right here.”

Eva took the few steps needed to reach the door to the stairwell. “See.” She tried the knob, but it was locked. Her heart skipped, but then she noticed the badge key. She lifted her name badge to the black box. Normally, it would beep, and the door would unlock, but it was silent and the door still wouldn’t open. “I don’t understand.” She swiped her badge again. Locked.

Trapped.

“Maybe you don’t have access,” Dr. Prince said, with a little more arrogance than she thought necessary, and placed his hand in his pants pocket. “Damn it.” He checked his other pocket, then the pockets of his jacket, every pocket he tried came up empty. “I think I left my badge in my bag, along with my phone...” He ran his hands through his hair and growled, “Which is in my car.” He eyed Eva, his jaw ticking.

She sighed. “My phone is on my desk upstairs.”

Evangeline looked around as she called out, “Hello, anyone down here?” She moved quickly down the narrow hall. All the doors were locked. There wasn’t a soul left to help them. Someone had to come eventually; a janitor, someone with keys to the stairwell, someone who had to sort through the linen, regardless of the power outage.

Dr. Prince swore so loudly it reverberated off the basement walls. Eva thought about staying at the other end of the hall. Far away from the linen room door, and the man who looked ready to punch something as she approached him.

“It’s fucking locked,” he shouted.

Eva couldn’t help but lower her eyes to the floor as she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He huffed a defeated breath, and rested his back against the door. “It’s not your fault.”

His tone, the firm set of his jaw, and the tight line of his lips suggested otherwise. She could almost hear his thoughts as his body sank to the floor. His back slid down the metal door until he was sitting on the cold concrete.

The small amount of optimism she'd seen in his eyes earlier had evaporated along with the hope of getting out of here anytime soon. He was blaming her. Blaming her for losing whatever this precious thing was, this item he had so easily left behind. The way those blue-green eyes assessed her with such irritation, she wondered how he could even stomach talking to her.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"So am I."

The apology wasn't for her.

She wasn't sure if it was the fact that he was looking at her as if she had destroyed his world, or that she was trapped with the "beast" in the damn basement, but her eyes began to pool with tears as she turned away from his hateful stare.

CHAPTER THREE

DR. PRINCE WAS too busy ignoring Evangeline to notice her blatant stare. About thirty minutes ago she gave up trying to remember the lyrics to the song she'd heard on the radio that morning, and had chosen to hum one of her favorite songs instead. But humming, it seemed, had begun to annoy even her. So instead, she decided to catalog every detail of the man sitting across the tiny hallway. She liked that his dark hair was cropped short on the sides and was longer on the top. She especially liked when he ran his fingers through it. The messier it got, the more appealing it became. His eyes, she finally decided about twenty minutes ago, before he'd closed them, were definitely aquamarine, and even in the low light they shined. But, it was after her tears had dried up, just as soon as the doctor had removed and offered her his coat to sit on, that his features had given way to a kinder nature. The doctor had smiled when she'd thanked him. She'd figured guilt was more responsible for his chivalry than actual kindness or caring, but she'd taken it, nevertheless.

They'd been stuck down in the bowels of the hospital for who knows how long, and besides his humble gesture, and her timid thank you, it had been silent. She'd chosen to hum only to relieve the tension between them, to break the ice. Maybe he'd ask her what song she'd been humming, and then she could ask him how he liked being a doctor. But no such luck. Eva had observed Dr. Prince as he exhaled and inhaled boredom rather than actually speak to her. His movements had only been to relieve the stillness in which he sat. Now, his head leaned against the wall. The doctor's eyes were closed, his thick lashes fanning down over his high cheekbones. He was a beautiful man, and she hated to admit it, but she enjoyed watching his chest rise and fall with even and calm breaths.

"I think I like your humming more than I do your staring," he said and Eva felt heat bloom across her cheeks. He cleared his throat and opened his eyes.

"I wasn't staring," she lied and dropped her gaze to her hands that were now wringing in her lap.

He chuckled and something shifted in Eva's chest. "Do you prefer Evangeline or Eva?" he asked as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his sleeves.

She looked down at her name badge, too pleased with how her name sounded in his deep, gruff voice. She shoved down the warmth that had blossomed in her stomach and steeled herself, her tone, as she said without any inflection, "I'm indifferent." His eyes met hers and when she smiled he looked away. "Do you prefer Dr. Prince or Your Highness?" she asked as she cocked her right brow.

This time the doctor laughed openly. His head tilted back and Eva couldn't help but admire the expanse of his throat. His jawline was peppered with a five o'clock shadow that dipped down his neck. It was a crazy thought, but she longed to touch it, to see if it was as rough as his usual demeanor. She pressed her lips together trying not to give in to her urge to laugh, too. Dr. Prince was just a man, after all. They were both stuck in this situation together; tired, hungry, and, even though he was unnaturally handsome, he was beginning to look worse for the wear, just as much as she was. Sitting on the cold concrete floor of a hospital basement was the quickest way to strip away any pretense.

"I prefer Lucas," he said with a rare small smile that caused her stomach to flutter.

"Lucas." She chewed on the word and nodded her head.

"How long have you worked at County?" he asked.

Eva tried not to focus in on the slight dimple that had formed in his left cheek as she said, "Just three months... what about you?"

"Too long, a little over seven years." He rolled his neck to the left and then the right with a long exhale.

"Do you like it?"

"On most days." He fixed his eyes on her mouth. "Tonight... not so much." He frowned and drifted his eyes down to the cuff of his sleeve.

It wasn't necessarily that she wanted to hear his voice, or that its tenor made her feel like a school girl, it was more that she'd grown tired of the awkward silence. She decided, regardless of whether or not the doctor's attention was now on the sleeve of his shirt, that she would just talk. "If you must know, I moved here from Florida in July."

His laughter was soft as he smiled and said, "Why the hell did you move here?"

"I needed a change."

It was only a half-truth, but the truth, nonetheless. Dr. Prince... Lucas... didn't need to hear her sob story about heartbreaks and small towns. She

left one hole in the wall for another, but at least here she had a new start.

He nodded and his smile faded. "Don't we all."

He rolled up the sleeves of his white button down to the elbow, but she'd been so transfixed with his smile, and how his lips appeared so soft, even stretched across his perfect teeth, that she hadn't noticed the scars... not right away. Her eyes naturally glanced down to the movements of his hands as he maneuvered the shirt up his arm. She bit back her gasp as his ruined skin was unveiled. Eva allowed her eyes to linger over the burns on his right arm only for a second, but it was long enough he'd noticed.

"It's an interesting thing, seeing how people react to this." He held up his right arm, the dim light seemed to spotlight the white and pink raised skin. "But, I have to say, your reaction has to be my favorite." His tone was utterly joyless, that gorgeous smile, that laugh, they'd fallen dead to the floor as he scanned her features. "Tell me, *Eva*, is that actual horror in your eyes?"

Lucas glared at the girl unapologetically as she shifted, and the color in her cheeks paled.

"No," she said in a tight whisper, and it was then he noted the tears brimming on her lashes. She held his gaze as she said, "I was just surprised. It was rude of me to stare, I'm so sorry."

She was too kind and he was an asshole. It felt good to hurt people, to make them feel pain. Lucas suffered every day. Why shouldn't everyone else? But, for some reason, this woman, and her tear-filled, brown eyes had made him want to be something other than an arrogant prick for once. He raised his legs and rested his forearms on his knees as he closed his eyes. "Don't be sorry, at least not to me."

"I don't know what that means." Her voice sounded more confident than before so he allowed himself to face her and opened his eyes.

"It means... I'm an asshole." He lowered his gaze to his arm, and let it slide over the burnt flesh. He let himself go back to that night five years ago, a night so much like this one. He let his heart remember Rose, and the screaming and the pain. "It means I don't deserve that apology. It means you shouldn't look at me like that..." It was a struggle to breathe, to speak

past the narrowing of his throat. “You shouldn’t look at me with sorrow. I deserve worse than these scars.”

Lucas kept his eyes trained on the ruin of his skin, unable to bear whatever thoughts she’d tried to hide in those transparent eyes.

“W-what happened?” she breathed.

If the basement hallway hadn’t been so quiet, so still, he would’ve never heard her question. The bile in his stomach roiled. Lucas hadn’t told anyone what had happened to him and his family five years ago. People knew. Everyone in this town had some idea of the night’s events, but he’d never spoken of it. Not after he’d awoken in the hospital’s burn unit, not after he’d buried his family, his love, his life. He’d never uttered a word about the night he’d lost it all.

“Do you think if something is never confessed that a person can ever truly be forgiven?” The doctor’s heart sprinted inside his chest, hoping, dying to be free of the burden, but as Evangeline’s eyes met his, he suddenly wished he’d left his ghosts inside the car with his badge and cell phone. The thought of offering her the weight to sink with him, this girl...

“I think in order to live, you have to let go.” As she spoke, even though her lips trembled, the words held steady. She was stronger than he’d given her credit for, and Lucas desperately wanted to lean against the pillar she offered him.

Thunder rolled through the hospital walls, and shook the locks Lucas had sealed around himself years ago. This night, this storm, he’d thought it earlier, it was exactly like that night, and maybe he was supposed to confess his truth in the dark to a beautiful stranger. Maybe she was sent here to take his sin and absolve him so he could breathe, just fucking breathe one day without the ache of his loss and the flames on his skin. Maybe he was just tired of hiding, and maybe she was a safe bet, a person here today and gone tomorrow.

The hallway fell completely quiet, and he thought, if only for a split second, he could hear the rapid beat of Eva’s pulse as she awaited his confession. She was sitting with her feet crossed below her, atop the jacket he’d loaned her like the gentlemen he’d once been, and she said, “Dr. Prince, we all have a history that’s slowly suffocating us, but we can only come up for air if we allow ourselves to swim.”

Evangeline didn’t smile. It was as if she could sense that what he was about to tell her was something that could drown them both, and before he

could stop himself, before he could leash the words with years of practice,
he told this stranger his sin.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUCAS SWALLOWED DEEPLY, his eyes fell on the ravaged skin of his arm, and Evangeline's heart stopped. She didn't know this man. She didn't know if he liked cream in his coffee, or even sugar. She had no clue what his favorite color was, what kind of car he drove, or if he preferred reading books to watching television, but when he finally lifted his eyes to hers she was able to see it all. Able to see that he was, in fact, suffocating. She could see straight through the mask. She saw pain and fear, and love and hate. The disgust, the hope, and every little ounce of pride spilled over his dark lashes. He suffered, and so had she. They were the same. Something inside of her clicked into place, something that had always been hidden and quiet, awaiting a moment like this. Something so innately human and pure and real pulled her from the comfort of her side of the hallway. She moved to where Dr. Prince was sitting, his legs unfolded on the cold floor. His eyes widened as he watched her settle in beside him.

"I'm responsible for the death of my family." He choked on the last few words and without a second thought Eva placed her hand on his shoulder.

He didn't shrug away from her touch, but his slight shudder almost shook her resolve. She lowered her hand, let her fingers trail over the scars as she whispered, "I don't believe you."

This time he pulled away, his voice filled with bitterness. "You don't know me."

"Tell me," was all she said.

He exhaled a shaky breath, and his right arm fell to his side lightly resting in the seam between their outstretched legs. Her fingers itched to touch him, to soothe whatever anger churned and tormented him. She didn't know him, not really, but she wanted to.

"Tell me," she repeated and boldly laced her fingers with his.

His head turned quickly, and his gaze pinned her. She remained still, ready for the attack, ready for him to rip away from the hold. Instead, Lucas gripped her tighter, holding her as if he was falling, like she was the only thing able to anchor him to the present as his eyes closed. "Five years ago, I lost my fiancée and my parents in a car accident."

Evangeline pressed her lips together, holding back her gasp—her emotion. She watched his chest rise and fall with each strained breath until his eyes opened, and he looked at her, begging her for some sort of resolution.

“That night... it was a lot like tonight. The weather... it was our rehearsal dinner. Rose and I were going to get married the next day.” Eva felt nauseous as he continued, “I’d had a few glasses of wine, nothing more than normal, but the roads were... and the ice... I lost control. One minute everyone was laughing, and then the next it was silent as the car careened off the road. It was surreal. I did everything I’d been taught. I pumped the brakes, but it was a blur. I’d been driving too fucking fast...” Eva realized she was squeezing his hand so tight there was no color left in his fingers. When she tried to release some of the tension, his hand clamped down, holding, almost crushing her palm to his. “We were talking about our future and wedding plans, laughing about my father’s inability to hold his own liquor when it all went to shit. I was supposed to be responsible, I was supposed to be sober.”

Lucas’s voice began to rise as the tears trickled from Eva’s eyes.

“The car was... it was an antique, my father loved old things, but when we hit that tree, not even the rain could put out the flames. I was trapped and forced to listen to them scream... I listened to them die, and I was helpless. I was useless... and when the flames finally came for me, everything had gone quiet again, and I knew they were gone... my life, my future was taken from me in less than five minutes. So when it was my time... I welcomed it. I needed the pain because it was all my fault.”

“Lucas I-I’m so—”

“Sorry?”

She didn’t flinch at the interruption. But, she didn’t know what to say. What did you say to a person who had lost everything? No one had ever been able to say the right thing to her. So, instead, she shook her head before resting it on his shoulder. “How did you survive?”

“I didn’t,” he said so softly she almost thought she’d imagined it.

Lucas let go of her hand, leaving it to rest on her thigh. It was so small, appeared so fragile, and even though he hadn’t deserved the support she’d

given him, he was glad for it. He was glad for her warmth. Her faint smell, the sweet fragrance of wildflowers, seemed to pull him from his nightmare.

"I was lucky they said. When I woke up in the hospital, the next day, they told me I was fucking lucky."

"The burns?"

"My chest, and the entirety of my right arm, all third-degree burns, but I was lucky because I lived, because I still had the use of my hands. I still got to be a doctor." He couldn't hide the animosity in his tone, the regret.

She traced her fingers along his arm, and again, his heart hammered as the animal inside of him tried to claw its way out from under his skin. It felt wrong, but right at the same time. He was numb, but he could feel the heat of her fingertips. The repetitive trail she dusted up and down his forearm somehow calmed him.

"It wasn't your fault," she whispered.

He tamped down his anger and evened out his tone as he said, "I shouldn't have been driving."

"Were you drunk?" Her brows knitted together. Skeptical.

He searched her eyes for blame, but there was none, and it pissed him off. She should hate him, move back to her side of the hall but instead, she looked at him with empathy, empathy he didn't deserve. "I wasn't drunk, but—"

"But... the weather was bad. If it was like tonight, I don't think Mother Theresa would have made it through the streets. Sober or not, you are not to blame."

It wasn't that simple. He'd lost everything and she was boiling the last five years down to a simple sentence, a lie. *You are not to blame*. The muscle in his jaw ached as he clenched his teeth together. This woman... this girl had no idea.

"*I was driving*," he shouted, close to completely losing his temper. Lucas stood. He needed the space, needed to think. "They died and I did nothing... *nothing*, to prevent it."

He began to pace the small hall, leaving her on the floor. He wouldn't look at her, couldn't see the judgment forming in her eyes. He barely heard the rustle of her clothing as she stood, but he sensed it before she touched him. Her small hand felt steady on his shoulder blade and stilled his movements. He refused to turn around, refused to face her as she said, "I'm sorry, I was just trying to—"

“Don’t. There’s nothing you can say or do that will change anything.” Lucas spoke with venom before he let his head fall into his hands, and let the tears fall as he remembered the screams and how they’d gone silent. He *had* been trapped. The smoke prevented him from seeing Rose just mere feet from him in the passenger seat. He’d thanked God every day for that small mercy, but he also cursed him for not letting him see her one last time.

Evangeline dropped her hand from his back and the heat of her touch dissipated. A chill covered his skin as Eva’s sweet scent faded, as well.

Her voice was distant. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to be you, Lucas. But I know death, and I know the blame game.”

The doctor finally turned, only to find Eva on the other side of the hall, her back against the wall, her eyes cast down and her shoulders pulled inward as she continued, “You feel sorry for yourself, you let yourself believe it’s all your fault. You allow the events to twist and corrode into what you think happened, until the pain becomes your oxygen, and self-imposed punishment is the only way you know how to survive.”

Evangeline raised her head. Her cheeks were alabaster and stained with tears. Her lips trembled and something dark flashed behind her eyes. Loss, fear, and something more... something Dr. Prince couldn’t riddle out. It straightened her posture and hardened her gaze. He took a few steps toward her and she shook her head. “You have to know... you have to know deep down if you could’ve moved, if you hadn’t been trapped, you would’ve freed them from the wreckage. You know, somewhere in there...” She pointed to his chest. “That the weather spun those tires, took control, not the few glasses of wine you had with dinner. You know it, Dr. Prince, but you’d rather suffocate than face it.”

Everything she said was true. He took another step closer, closing the space between them despite her wishes for him to stay away. Her wounds were starting to show and he wanted to pick away at the scab, just like she had done to him.

“What about you?” His tone was quiet. A barely concealed storm swirled in his chest as he breathed her in. “What do you know about loss?”

Eva’s entire body shivered beneath his stare. He was tired of feeling pain and anger. She’d stirred something inside of him, something cruel and feeling. He wanted to taste her emotion as it seeped from her eyes. He wanted her to bare it all for him like he’d done for her. He wanted to wipe

away that look in her eyes that said she understood, that she knew what it was like to die every day.

She knew nothing.

Evangeline's hand shook as she placed a strand of her hair behind her ear and said, "I know enough."

The doctor finally saw it then, the darkness in her eyes that mirrored his own, and his heart sank. It was easy to hate and assume the world had chosen him, only him, to swallow whole, but she was breaking right in front of him. He brought his hand to her cheek, and when she leaned into the touch his stomach hollowed. The lump in his throat strangled him as he demanded the same of her as she did of him earlier, "Tell me."

She tilted her head back. The dark brown color of her eyes blurred behind the tears. "I wanted to survive it, I wanted to swim... but I wasn't ready... so I moved here."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE AIR IN the room thinned as she tried desperately to breathe. His hand felt too familiar. His touch brought her to a time when things were easy, nights were cool, and crickets sang about love and summer heat. She closed her eyes letting her story form on her tongue.

“Are you running?” he asked as he lowered his hand from her face.

Eva’s eyes opened, a few tears trickled past her lashes as she watched the doctor lean against the wall. She lifted her fingertips to her cheek and traced where his touch had just been. She thought to herself that maybe she was just tired, but the way his eyes scanned her own, awaiting the rest of her tragedy, she wondered if this whole night had been planned by a power greater than the storm and the winds it wielded.

“I’m hiding.” She exhaled and shook her head. “No, that’s not entirely true.” She walked over to where he stood and leaned against the wall, as well. They both avoided the others’ stare and opted for the cracked foundation of the floor. “My mother died before I was even two, a rare stomach cancer.” The doctor’s breath hitched but she continued, eyes fixed on the crack. “My father raised me, he did the best he could. We lived in Dover, a smallish town outside of Tampa, east of the beaches and far enough away from a real life as possible. My dad was a butcher, and instead of drowning his sorrows in liquor like his father had, he disappeared... inside himself.”

Lucas lifted his head and she did the same. His brows pinched together as he said, “That sounds lonely.”

“It was.” Evangeline pulled in a deep breath as her childhood flickered through her mind. Fifties music, tobacco, dusty driveways, screened doors, oak trees, and Spanish moss. The heat alone had been enough to render you breathless, and the humidity, she could still smell it. When she’d first relocated to Massachusetts in the summer, it was hard for her to sleep without the white noise of the cicadas. “I was so lonely it was easy to fall for the first guy to pay me any attention.” Lucas’s body tensed. “Grayson was everything a teenage girl thought she wanted. Tall, popular, sporty, attractive, and had enough swagger a girl could forget that maybe he was too good to be true. I’d thought he was sweet, at first. Sweet enough to

notice the bookworm who seemed invisible to everyone else, and smart enough to know that his smile—his attention—wouldn't go unnoticed on a girl like me. We were together for almost two years before he started to cut me down, first with words and then..."

Her voice caught in her throat, and just like she'd done for him, Dr. Prince laced his fingers through hers as he said, his voice dangerously low, "He hurt you?"

Evangeline nodded and the doctor's body became completely rigid. "I should have left. I never thought I'd be one of those women, the kind who put up with that. But, Grayson was all I ever knew... for a very, very long time." Lucas squeezed her hand.

"What made you finally decide to leave?" he asked.

It was most likely the guilt that had spread like a disease in her heart, but she thought she could see the questions in the doctor's blue-green eyes. Questions she'd asked herself endlessly.

Why would she stay with a guy like that? How could she let herself go through that? Why had she been so weak?

"We were on again, off again for so many years," Eva explained. "After a while you forget your own worth. And my father, he had no idea. I was good at covering the bruises, just as good as Grayson was about keeping up facades. My dad had grown to love Grayson. Grayson was smooth, you know? Always helping Dad around with the house, the yard, and at times, once he was older, he even helped pay the bills." Eva's throat narrowed, her ability to speak was hindered to almost a whisper. "Then my dad, he got sick, and my whole world bottomed out. Grayson kept pushing me to get married, he wanted Dad's shop, wanted the house, wanted to put my father in a nursing home. I couldn't do it. My father raised me on his own, and I wouldn't abandon him. So I packed up the house, put it and the shop up for sale, and planned to move closer to the city, closer to better medical treatments. My dad's colon cancer was aggressive, but H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center was supposed to be cutting-edge. I hoped the money we'd get from the sales could help with the cost. But..."

She heard the doctor swallow down the truth. The truth she'd learned much sooner than she had anticipated.

"When did he die?"

"This past summer. Two days after Grayson almost put me in the hospital."

The memory tore through her. Eva's heart pounded furiously, and her hands began to sweat. The pain, that night, after Grayson realized her plan, he'd come unglued. He told her she'd never leave him, that everything was his. He'd said he "*put in the time*" that he deserved the money she'd gotten from the shop and the house. He'd been delusional to ever think he was entitled to anything. Thankfully all she remembered of that night was the first hit. Everything after that had been silent... black... and cold.

Lucas let go of her hand, and rested his own on her shoulder, gently turning her to face him. "Breathe, Eva."

She sucked in a ragged breath, once and then again. Lucas cupped her face again, wiping away the deluge of tears that poured freely down her cheek.

"Grayson went to jail, and I buried my father. I wanted to put as much distance between me and Dover, my old life, as possible. So I took the little I had, and headed north."

"You started over." He sounded so sure, but the fissures in Eva's heart split deeper, uneven. She'd never healed properly.

"After all this time... I'm still hiding."

"What you did... it was very brave." He framed her face with his hands and watched her for a few seconds.

The quiet moment was intimate, and the comfort of his hands soothed her uneven pulse. They'd both ripped open their wounds tonight. There was no judgment in his eyes, and she knew hers reflected the same as his. The space between them lit and shimmered with unspoken words and feeling. The longer his eyes grazed her skin, the harder it was for her to remember to breathe. The pressure in her chest crowded her lungs. Lucas's lips parted, and when he spoke, their breath, his essence mingled with hers. His eyes fell to her mouth, and she bit her bottom lip as he said, "I'm tired of feeling lost."

It was such a simple statement, but it filled her with so much hope. Each breath came faster than the next as the space between them dwindled. Eva's eyes dipped to his lips, finding home in the shape of them. She imagined that they were soft and liked how his upper lip was fuller than the bottom. She noticed the strict set of his jaw, and the strength of his fingertips as they moved deeper into her hair.

The way his eyes devoured her mouth gave her the will to say the words, "I'm tired of hiding."

He'd been a stranger before tonight, and yet, she found a piece of herself in the small, light green burst that surrounded his pupils. This man, whether he meant to or not, had begun to unravel her, thread by thread. There was no such thing as time, death, and pain. In this basement, with him, there was an easy answer, a healing confession. His nose grazed hers, and she held her breath. The perfect tension in her chest threatened to burst if she didn't feel his lips right then. *Right now.* With casual grace, he swept his lips across her mouth once. Eva's skin was a fuse, and even that brief touch had ignited what had been lost inside of her. She leaned in as he exhaled a shaky breath and pressed his lips to her damp cheek.

Dr. Prince moved his mouth to her ear, his voice a low heartbeat, and whispered, "I don't want you to hide from me."

Eva's mouth split into a shy smile, and her cheeks heated to a flawless rose. She was about to tell him she'd never felt so safe, but the door to the basement opened and banged against the wall. Lucas pulled away, his warmth following him to the healthy distance he'd put between them as they both stared at the janitor.

Lucas licked his lips, trying to catalog the mere taste he'd had of her. *Eva. Evangeline.* The quiet girl with so much hidden beneath her surface. Her scent of wildflowers muddled his senses, and if he'd really kissed her like he'd wanted to, he'd know exactly how she tasted. It was just a tease, and now the need to know her, it thrummed through his veins, pushing his heart to move faster, move time, so that he could try again. Next time he'd be sure. He'd kiss her softly like she deserved, and then claim her mouth, her flavor, and...

He shook his head. The fresh air from the open basement door broke through his lust-addled daze. The janitor was staring at him... expectant. *Had he asked him a question?*

"A couple of hours, I think. What time is it?" Eva asked the man.

The janitor must have inquired about how long they'd been stuck down here, but Lucas was too busy thinking about Eva's mouth to notice.

"Almost one-thirty in the morning, miss." The janitor's eyes shifted to the doctor. "I-I'm sorry I didn't get down here sooner, Dr. Prince. I mean... the power's out so I figured—"

He didn't recognize the man, and a splinter of guilt, something that before tonight wouldn't have bothered him, but now it stuck in his side like a stitch from a hard run. Eva had said she was hiding, but it was he who had given up on everything and everyone after he'd lost his family. Everything that she'd gone through, a wave of rage poured through him. Men like Grayson... his jaw clenched, and a gray light paled the room as he turned, looked at Evangeline and said to the janitor, "It's okay. But, I need to get into the linen room. I lost something in one of the OR laundry bags. I need to find it."

Eva's dark eyes were warm as she appraised him. Everything about tonight begged him to look at her, to *see* her, to let her guide him past the walls he'd built five years ago. He didn't even know her last name, and as the air in the basement cleared her scent faded, and he told himself he wasn't wholly ready.

"Sure thing, Dr. Prince. Let me run upstairs..." The janitor propped the door open with a small, plastic, brown wedge the doctor hadn't noticed earlier. "I gotta grab the right set of keys from the office. But, I have to warn you—"

"I know, I might not ever find it." Lucas had tried to keep the anger out of his tone. The thought of losing that picture... it had become his talisman. He never thought himself superstitious, but he needed it—needed it like oxygen.

Eva spoke, her voice small, "Do you want me to stay? I'd like to help you find it."

The janitor chuckled and mumbled, "Good luck," under his breath as he turned and headed up the stairs.

"No. I don't want to keep you." He hated how formal he sounded, and how her shoulders pulled inward again.

"Okay."

The silence was uncomfortable as he stared at the linen room doors. It was only a brief moment before he turned back to Eva. She was chewing on her bottom lip, her posture sinking by the second, hiding again. He flicked his eyes to the door, and his chest emptied. Tonight was more than he was ready for, but it was the first time in years he'd felt almost normal. Eva made him feel like it was okay to let go of the poison, to let go of the hold Rose had on his heart, his future. It was just one step, but he felt so much

lighter. He'd shed his pain to Evangeline like a flower parted with its last petal.

"I'll walk you to your car," he offered.

"I don't have a car."

"You're not walking home in this." He shook his head. "I'll drive you."

"But what about—"

"I think... Eva... some things are meant to be lost." As he said it, his heart squeezed out an irregular beat. Even if it was true, it didn't mean it didn't cut him open.

"I thought—"

"Thank you, for tonight." Lucas took her hand in his. He ran his thumb in small circles inside her palm.

She nodded and dropped her eyes to their joined hands. "But..."

"I want to be ready, but one night—"

"It can't fix everything." She raised her chin.

"When will I see you again?" He let go of her hand and she shoved them in her scrub pockets.

"Well, I work tomorrow—"

"Preferably, away from the hospital." He chuckled as he grabbed his jacket and shrugged it on.

"Oh." She raised her brows. "Oh," she repeated. Her voice a little higher, a bit more nervous than it had been all night. "I think I could handle that."

The lights came on, showering the dingy basement in a white wash of fluorescence. Eva squinted her eyes and the doctor chuckled once more. "Come on, let me drive you home and we'll figure something out."

He motioned for her to head up the stairs. She smiled, her lips splitting her face, lifting into the pink color of her cheeks as she passed him. She moved quickly up the stairs, but before he followed her, he glanced back one last time at the linen room doors. The space inside his ribcage seemed smaller as he said, only loud enough that he could hear, "I'm sorry."

"Lucas?" Eva called from about ten steps ahead.

He didn't answer as he turned and took a few steps at a time, not slowing until he was right behind her. He leaned in and inhaled her scent, a reminder that it was okay to keep going, to move forward.

"You know more about me than anyone in this hospital, yet I don't know your last name." Lucas's serious tone filled the stairwell. Eva turned,

brought her chocolate eyes to his, and took a step down.

They were both eye to eye but his gaze dropped to her mouth as her lips pulled into a crooked smile.

“I was born Evangeline Rossi, but when I...” Her smile dimmed.
“When I left... I changed it to Bell.”

Evangeline Bell.

A name to hide behind, a name that he wanted to repeat over and over again, feel it against his tongue.

“Were you sad to lose your father’s name?” he asked and immediately wished he hadn’t. Her smile completely faded.

“I buried that name when I buried him.”

“I’m sorry.”

His apology softened the crease between her brows and she said, “No, don’t be.” The small smile returned to her lips. “At some point, we all have to give up something in order to move past the hurdles that life loves to throw at us.”

He didn’t need to look over his shoulder to see what he was giving up. His parents, Rose, they weren’t gone, but they were more than just a hurdle. He couldn’t compartmentalize his life into quick and easy fixes, but Eva’s courage had at least lightened his heart enough to pave a better way.

The snow was coming down in powdered clumps once they’d made their way to the parking lot. Eva had grabbed her things on the way out, and by the time they both got to his car, they were thoroughly dusted in white. Dr. Prince’s fingers burned from the bitter bite of the storm as he opened the passenger door for Eva. She brushed off as much snow as she could before sitting inside the SUV. Lucas was about to shut the door, but the snow had gathered in her hair and created a halo of light that outlined her bright pink, frosted cheeks.

Lucas rested his hand on the frame of the door as he leaned in and said in a tone he’d almost forgotten, “You look so beautiful right now.”

Evangeline wrapped her hand around the back of his neck as he pressed his lips to her cheek. Her fingertips tickled his hairline as the heat of her palm melted the snow that had accumulated along his collar. The goosebumps spread down his spine, and as much as he wanted to properly kiss her, show her just how much she affected him, he wouldn’t rush this.

Evangeline Bell brought her soft lips to his ear and said, “I’m glad I found you.”

**** There will be no “The End” because this is just the beginning...
Every Beautiful Piece will be released as a full-length novel, hopefully by
the end of 2017.

A.M. Johnson lives in Utah with her family where she works as a full-time nurse. If she's not busy with her three munchkins, you'll find her buried in a book or behind the keyboard. She loves romance and all things passionate.

Amanda enjoys exploring all genres and bringing life to the human experience.

Also by A.M. Johnson

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Coming Soon

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the forgotten man

Caroline Nolan

A TALE OF two men defined by how they look and the one woman who
refuses to see it.

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BEAST – The Forgotten Man – 1st ed.

“ONE MORE! GIVE me one more! Or are you *weak*?” Louis yells in my face. “Are you Adam? Are you weak?”

If he thinks bating me with shit talk and name calling is going to get me to work harder...he’s right. And I *hate* when Louis is right. I hate when anyone but *me* is right. And I especially hate it when it’s being yelled back in my face.

Months ago, I *was* the one who was right.

Louis would have believed me when I said I couldn’t take anymore. Give anymore. He wouldn’t have pushed the way he does now. He would have let me give into the pain, give into the defeat. Things were so much easier then. People understood—were sympathetic, pitying even. If I wanted to give up, give in—they all let me.

But those days are gone. They’ve disappeared as though they never existed. Now, there is no giving up. There is no giving in. I’m not allowed. I’m not given the chance. So with every ounce of nearly extinguished energy I have left in my over-exhausted, over-used, marred arms, I lift thirty pound weights over my head.

Thirty pounds.

That’s it. Thirty measly, fucking pounds.

To look at me, you’d think it was three hundred. My shirt drenched with sweat, my breathing erratic and uneven. My entire body tight and tense, begging for mercy. But mercy wasn’t there months ago, and it isn’t here now.

In the past, I would have laughed at anyone struggling to lift such little weight.

Weak.

Pathetic.

Embarrassing.

All words I would have used.

Words I did use.

Words *I* now have to overcome.

Thirty pounds used to be nothing. Now, it’s everything.

A milestone.

One that took weeks if not longer to achieve. It took every drop of blood, sweat, and pain my body was willing to give—and even some it wasn't.

But this is my new reality. Things will never come as easily as they once did. Every day will be a struggle. A fight. A bitter reminder of what I once was to what I can now only be. What a matter of minutes—fucking seconds—has done to my life. Fast and swift, but leaving the rest of my days forever changed.

I've seen it happen before, witnessed its wrath. I've come face to face with its fury countless times. But I never fully understood until its power, wrath and fury until it fell upon me. It doesn't take long before the kiss of a flame does its damage. Scars you, imprints itself on you—on your soul. Leaving you...different. The fire may have been put out long ago, but the burn remains inside long after the flame's been extinguished.

I'm not the same Adam I was before. I will never be him again. That Adam disappeared, vanished with the grey and black smoke. What it left behind, I still haven't figured out. But one word keeps emerging into the forefront of my mind.

Beast.

"I lied," Louis says interrupting my thought. "Give me five more."

"No." My heaving breath sounding like a grunt. Sweat continues to pour down my face, into my eyes, creating another burn that feels all too familiar.

"Yes!" he argues.

"Fuck you!" I grit through clenched teeth. My arms raised above my head, shaking.

"Three more!"

"I hate you!" I growl.

"Two!"

"Motherfucker!" I nearly scream.

"Last one," he shouts, the only way left to encourage me.

A roar so loud and violent escapes my lips as I lift the weight of the world masked as thirty pounds for the last time. And when I drop the weight to the ground, a rush so powerful runs through my body. A *thrill* I haven't felt in a long time.

I close my eyes and I'm brought back to a time where I felt this way every day. Riding in the back of the truck with my brothers, sirens wailing

above, the honk of the horn ringing loud for everyone to hear. Adrenaline pumping strong through our veins. Those were the moments I lived for. The thrill of pulling up to where our opponent stood—waiting, calling on us.

Taunting. This was our fighting ring where there was only one rule.

Do. Not. Lose.

Our lone rule. Our lone commandment.

There was too much at stake—too much at risk if we were not victorious.

Never let the flame win. Never let the flame overcome.

But overcome it did and that loss fell directly on me, on my shoulders.

The scars it left behind will always be proof of defeat. My defeat.

“Great job,” Louis says, his eyes examining my shoulder, bicep, then back up to the curve of my neck. “No breaking, no bleeding, no blistering. The B’s are covered. Looking good.”

I almost laugh at the choice of his words. I probably would have if I wasn’t so exhausted. Because if there is *one* thing I know, *one* thing I do understand, it’s that I will *never* look good again—no matter of what the doctors or Louis try to tell me.

Three different hospitals, countless appointments, and numerous plastic surgeons all had the exact same thing to say.

We can try.

Try. That’s the best they could offer—the best they could do.

But I wasn’t interested in *try*. Like Yoda said, ‘*Do or do not—there is no try.*’ I didn’t see a point in scarring more parts of my body in order to fix what I knew was unfixable.

‘*Maybe after you give it some time, some thought,*’ my mother said, hoped, pleaded. With every flickering glance, every refusal to look anywhere past the unharmed side of my face, never daring to let her eyes fall beyond my chin. Ignoring my left ear, the entire side of my neck and my shoulder. Determined not to bring attention to my scars, which only emphasized them more.

But I had made my decision. This was who I was. *What* I was. I’ve had to accept it. Now, so does everyone else.

“Next week, we move on to the forties. And then we’ll really see what you can do,” Louis says, a smug smile marking his face—already plotting my next hour of hell.

“Can’t wait,” I murmur, just barely lifting my head.

His smirk turns into a light laugh before he starts making notes about my recovery and any improvements he's noticed over the course of our session.

"Did I pass?" I ask, reaching for my water bottle.

"You're progressing," he looks down at me, pausing. "Physically." *Physically*. The word catches my attention.

I look up and watch as he rests his hands over his abdomen, squaring his shoulders and tilts his head. I've seen this stance before. It's the one he takes when he turns from physiotherapist to psychotherapist.

I *hate* when he does that.

"Tell me about your plans for the weekend," he asks.

A simple-enough inquiry, one would think. Some small talk bullshit between guys before I leave. But that's not what this is. I know what he's doing. He's worked this tactic on me a few occasions before and it lead him right to the same place it will this time.

Nowhere.

If I needed or wanted to talk to a shrink, I'm sure I could call up any of the four my mother has on speed dial.

"Well, let's see," I start, leaning back against the bench press. I pretend to think about it when I already know exactly what I'll be doing. Spending hours applying and reapplying medical creams to my injuries, bandaging and re-bandaging in case of blisters, and capping it all off with a Rocky marathon, Max by my side. But I don't say any of this. Instead I go with what I know will frustrate him more. Sarcasm and self-pity.

"I used to have a few girls I could call for a good time but none of them seem to want to play nurse these days—at least not when it's not the kinky kind," I wink mockingly. "This may come as a surprise but it seems woman aren't all that interested in fucking a scarred monster."

Louis barely flinches. Probably because he's now used to my cynical, contemptuous remarks.

"My boys are on rotation this weekend. *Still* able to work since the roof didn't cave in on them so they're out."

Not even a blink.

"And I'd rather burn my entire other side than visit my mother. So, yeah. Those are my weekend plans," I say, giving him a wide, malicious smile. "What do you say Louis? Want to hang out with a bitter, out of work,

twenty-nine year old? I swear,” I raise my right hand, “I’m a hell of a good time.”

Louis presses his lips together, his first and only reaction. “Sounds like it.”

I flick my eyebrows twice. I wasn’t lying when I said I used to be a hell of a time. I *was*. Always lightening the mood at the station, the one with the best jokes. Even on dates—including the horrible ones.

I. Was. Fun.

But that’s the key word.

Was.

Louis raises his arms, crossing them over his chest. A sure tell he’s got something more to say and I’m going to have to hear it, whether I want to or not. “You’ve really got the self-deprecating thing working. Remarks like that so easily roll off your tongue. Tell me,” he says, “how much longer is the *poor me* attitude going to stick around?” Looking down at his Apple watch, he pretends to do the math in his head. “It’s been…” he tilts his bald black head to the side once more, “ten weeks, four days and what…three hours now?”

I narrow my eyes into tiny slits.

“Sounds like I’ve got a good streak going,” I say, fully aware of how insolent I sound.

But hey, I’ve earned the right to be an asshole. If there’s one thing the scars have allowed me, it’s that.

“You refuse to see the bright side,” Louis says, dropping his head in disappointment.

“Bright side?” I repeat, certain I heard wrong. “There’s a bright side to this?” I point to my neck. “I must have missed it. So please, enlighten me,” my tone deepening, “tell me how my life still has a *bright* side. Tell me how being forced to leave my job—”

“It’s a leave of absence,” Louis interjects.

“Losing all my strength and most of the feeling from my shoulder—”

“Which you *are* regaining.”

“From being the guy girls would cream their panties over to the one they can barely stomach to look at—”

“Those aren’t the right kind of women for you.”

“STOP! Jesus *fucking* Christ, will you just stop!” I say standing, coming face to face with him. “Let me wallow in my self-pity like a grown-ass

man.”

Louis takes a step closer. So close, if he were to move any further our chests would be touching. He may only an inch or two taller than me but, *fuck*, sometimes it feels like he’s either grown by three feet or I’ve shrunk by that much.

“I have,” he says sternly. “I’ve given you time. Time to wallow, to be spiteful—angry. I’ve given you longer than I’ve given anyone else.”

I’m resentful of how he manages to keep his voice so steady—so unwavering when he must be itching to yell, scream, maybe even shove. I wish I had that kind of discipline. But I don’t. Not like he does. He reigns it in, inflicting his influence and authority with small gestures. A tilt of the head or arms crossing over his chest. The feeling of inferiority it inflicts burns through my veins. Inferiority was not a feeling I was used to. I never bowed down to anyone or anything. No man was too big, no blaze was too strong.

But now...

My inferiority only infuriates me.

“Maybe it’s because of how you got here,” he says after some thought. “The *why*. You’re here because you saved a life. Have saved many lives. Because of you, there are people out in the world who get to live. So I’ve treaded lightly. More than I should have.”

“Spare me the hero worship bullshit,” I answer back. “The time for that was months ago.”

“Don’t you know how lucky you are?” he asks. “You of all people know how many people come out of fires worse off than you did. How many lose everything. *Everything!* Their lives will never be the same. Yours was only altered.”

“Altered?” I repeat, enraged.

How dare he *minimize* how my life has changed?

What *I*’ve lost.

“Fuck you Louis!” I growl. “You have no idea.”

“No—you have no idea. You forget what *I*’ve seen. The scars I’ve also had to witness. My client after you,” he nods to the reception area, “is a ten year old boy who has burns covering nearly forty percent of his body. A ten years old and forty percent!” he repeats. “And he’s nowhere near as self-pitying as you. He still smiles and is kind! His life has barely just begun and for the next foreseeable future it will be centered around surgeries and skin

grafts instead of baseball and play camp yet he comes in here, week after week, happy.”

I swallow, embarrassed at how his words affect me. Hearing how a ten year old seems to be handling things better than I am only adds to my current inferiority complex.

We burn victims, we always get the most sympathy—the special treatment. As we fucking should. But a kid? That’s just God being fucking merciless. No kids should need to deal with this.

“Not everything is skin deep, Adam,” he says, backing away a few steps. “See you next week.”

Before I have a chance to reply, he walks out the door of the workout room, dismissing me.

“Everything is skin deep Louis,” I say no one but myself, the room now empty.

I gather all my belongings—towel, water bottle, keys, wallet, and head to the locker room. I splash some cold water on my face, scanning the surface of my scarred skin in the mirror, my fingers gently touching the rippled skin. I feel for any openings, hoping to God none of my healing skin has reopened even though Louis already gave it the okay. It’s happened before and it took forever to close back up. Mutilated skin refuses to work with you. Only against. My eyes move upwards, towards my face where by some miracle, most of my scarring is minimal and has barely left a mark. But from the bottom of my left ear and the side of my neck is another story. My shoulder and my side...even more so. I decide to head straight home and shower there instead. I never feel much like sticking around, but today more than any other feels like a day I need to get out of here. And fast.

As I walk out of the locker room I see Louis giving a high five to a young boy.

“Gus, my man,” he says with a smile. “Ready to kick some *butt*?”

“You can say ass Louis,” the kid—Gus—replies. “I’m almost a teenager.”

“I thought your teen years were still three years away,” Louis says, smirking.

“A short three years,” Gus answers.

Louis bends at the waist, coming eye level with the kid. “But if I do, I’m afraid your mom might kick my—” Louis looks around the room, “*ass*.”

I can tell this makes Gus laugh by the shaking of his shoulders. “She only dropped me off today. She’s meeting with my doctor—”

Their voices fade as they walk away and head to the workout room where I can no longer hear what’s being said. But I can still see them perfectly, him—Gus perfectly. The distance doing nothing to fade away what can no longer be unseen no matter how much I wish it did. Yet, I can’t seem to look away either.

With his back facing me the entire time, his loose fitting cotton pants and a Spiderman t-shirt leave only his arms exposed...for everyone in the room to see.

I blink several times. Anger and rage boils inside at what the flames—my nemesis—can do to others. Did do to him.

Fuck. He’s just a kid.

A young kid who has his entire childhood ripped from him.

I zip up my sweater and pull the hood over my head, covering it. A new habit I’ve adapted—not leaving myself exposed for others to see. I pick up my gym bag, turn and head for the door, not wanting or ready to face another victim here today.

AN HOUR LATER, I grab a beer out of the fridge, twisting off the cap. I take a long swig, finally feeling relaxed after a shower. My phone chirps, indicating that I have a few text messages waiting for me.

One is from my mother which I ignore. If she really wanted to talk to me, she'd call. The second is an automated text reminder of my next appointment with Louis. I delete that one with vigor. The last one is from Stix, asking once again if I want to go to a club with him tonight.

I gotta give it to him, he doesn't give up.

Stix is one of few the buddies I have that aren't from my squad. Friends since high school—when he was too tall and too skinny to be called anything else. That, and because we played Varsity Lacrosse together. But to those who only know him now, he's Clayton. I'm about to text him back my usual reply when my phone lights up, his name flashing across the screen.

"Fuck face," he says before I even answer. "*Flaming Lights*—tonight. And yes, I see the irony in the club's name in talking to you."

If anyone but Stix opened their mouth and said anything like that to me now, we'd most likely have a problem. But since he doesn't think twice about saying those kinds of things to me, ours is the only relationship that hasn't changed since my accident. I feel like the same old me when around him. I'm able to feel...normal.

But not normal enough to go out to a club.

"Negative," I reply, sipping from my bottle.

"Will you fuck off and just come out already? No one's going to pay attention to your pussy ass scars when that ugly face is all they'll see."

My lip twitches, a hint of a smile forming but it still doesn't change my mind.

"I don't think so," I tell him. "Max and I are hanging out tonight."

"Don't you think it's time you got a little action from actual pussy and not just from your cat?" At the mention of Max, I pop my head around the corner of the kitchen and find him sprawled out on the couch, paws up in the air.

"Your lack of interest is hurting my game. I don't work as well without a wingman."

I think back to some of the crazy nights Stix and I used to have. If my face wasn't enough to get a girls attention, being a firefighter was. Nothing

gets a girl going like the idea of a man throwing her over his shoulder. I used to love the attention women gave me—and they loved the attention I gave them. It's one of the reasons I never thought about settling down. And why would I? I still had too many to experience, touch, taste.

But those memories are now soured by the first and only time I went out after the accident. By the stares and pitying looks. That night left me with nothing but a sick feeling in my stomach. I became an exhibit. An ugly display that couldn't be ignored among a sea of pretty people. The fleeting glances, the pointed fingers. Maybe they thought I wouldn't notice under the dim lights of the club, but I did. I noticed. I felt the stares, heard the burning questions they all wanted to ask.

What happened to you?

Will that heal?

Is that how you'll always look now?

Girls? Forget it.

I guess I couldn't blame them. If the dim lights couldn't hide what I had become, the morning lights definitely weren't going to do the trick.

"You don't need me," I say, keeping my answer short. Stix and I are close but I draw the line at confessing my feelings and self-confidence issues like a teenage girl. "Call Rob," I suggest.

Rob is Stix's coworker and always too happy to tag along.

"You're seriously going to leave me alone with Rob all night? He couldn't reel in a chick if he was giving away Tiffany gift cards," he says, his voice pleading.

"Sorry man. My night is planned."

I look around my apartment, to the framed pictures of the old me scattered around to my fighter gear sitting in the corner, untouched for months. None of those things reflective of my life today. My eyes fall to Max who is staring at me as though he's annoyed I'm invading *his* space. I glare at him, reminding him this *is* my apartment and I can be here all I want.

"You fucking suck, you know that?"

"I do," I answer, falling down on the couch. Max hisses.

"Fuck you," he says, but finishes our conversation as he always does.

"Call you tomorrow asshat."

I drop my phone down beside me and grab the remote, channel surfing until something, anything shifts my focus from the reminders found in my

apartment of how things used to be. And hopefully keep me too engaged to be reminded of how things are now.

NEXT WEEK WHEN I get to physio, Gus is sitting by himself in the waiting room. His jacket and small gym bag are on the floor beside him. Today, I get a good look at him and I see everything I missed last week.

Beyond the obvious burns on his arms and neck, his face is pretty much unharmed except for a patch near his hair line where hair has yet to grow back—if ever. But he has so much of it, dark brown nearing black, wavy nearing curly, it almost camouflages the injured area. But there is no camouflaging the arms. They'll be marked forever. Just like my neck and shoulder.

I look around the reception area, empty except for the cleaner spraying and wiping the glass windows. For a moment, I wonder why Gus is here alone—without Louis or his parents. Shouldn't someone be supervising him? What if he needs to go to the bathroom or something? I take a seat across and away from him and unzip my bag, sorting through my workout clothes and some of the creams I need to apply before my workout begins.

"Hi," I hear from across the floor. My eyes shoot up but the rest stays immobile.

He's moving chairs one by one before settling on the one directly in front of me. I take another look around the room, wondering if maybe I've misheard, maybe he isn't speaking to me. But the way he's staring clearly indicates he *is* speaking to me.

"Hey," I answer warily.

"I'm Gus," he says, introducing himself.

I sit up, unsure of what to say or even if I should say anything. Wasn't this kid taught not to speak to strangers?

"And your Adam," he adds.

My brows furrow a touch. How does this kid know my name?

"That's me," I say, uncomfortableness creeping up my spine. "You here alone?"

He shakes his head. "My mom's in there," he cocks his head towards Louis' closed office door in the corner.

I press my lips together and nod once. He continues to stare at me for another long minute, kicking his legs back and forth in his chair. And then he reopens his mouth, ready to talk once more. Only this time, he doesn't stop.

“She’s talking to Louis about my workouts. And probably my surgery. She has a ton of questions. Like a *thousand*. And they aren’t easy questions either. And if you don’t answer her with the truth, she *knows*. Like this one time, I broke her favorite teacup. Left a big chip in it. I told her it wasn’t me. But she knew I was lying. She said she could see it in my eyes, whatever that means. I wasn’t allowed to watch TV after school for a week. Not for breaking the cup, but for lying. So I hope Louis isn’t lying to her. It’s sucked not being able to watch TV.”

I’m completely unprepared for the overload of information this kid just unleashed on me. Everything from his mother’s questions to the chipped cup to being unable to watch TV fills my head.

“Kid,” I begin. “Didn’t your mom teach not to talk to strangers?”

“You’re not a stranger,” he answers simply. “I see you here all the time.”

He has? When? I only just noticed him for the first time last week.

“That still makes me a stranger,” I state.

Gus stands and moves into the chair next to mine, extending his hand out to me. I stare at it for a minute, slightly impressed at the balls on this kid, but also because it gives me a chance to see his scars up close. Slowly, tentatively, I reach out and take his hand, a smile instantly bursting on his face.

“Now we aren’t strangers,” he says, obviously pleased with himself.

“I guess not.”

For what feels like the hundredth time, I look around the clinic wondering where everyone is and how much longer I’ll be left alone with this kid.

“What happened to you?” he asks unapologetically, pointing to my neck.

I choke out a small laugh, once again surprised at audacity of this kid. Except for Stix and maybe Louis, most people walk on eggshells around me, minding every fucking gesture, watching every fucking word, careful not to unleash the beast behind the scars.

“You don’t have much of a filter do you?” I ask, a little amazed.

“I’m not sure,” he pauses to think it over. “Mom does say I should think more before I speak.”

“Maybe you should listen to your Mom, kid,” I advise.

A small look of disappointment flashes across his face. “I listen to her all the time. I have no choice. She’s sorta the boss.”

My eyes fall to where I see him lightly massaging the skin on his forearm with his tiny fingers. I remember the constant itch and stretch of the skin while it tried to heal. I still experience from time to time. Months ago, one of my doctors told me I was *fortunate* I didn’t have to worry about my skin still growing. Already being a grown man meant it was one less complication we had to worry about.

We.

As though he was living through this with me.

Back then, one less complication meant nothing to me. I was still injured. Still immobile. Still scarred. But watching Gus as he tries to heal while still growing, still to face spurts that will inevitably cause even more discomfort, watching him living through my *one less complication*...

I swallow hard.

“A roof caved in on me.”

His face tilts up at my words.

“I’m a firefighter,” I explain. “*Was* a firefighter.” I stretch out the good side of my neck out, tension growing as questions about my professional future still loom over me. “I thought I had the fire beat. But the flames were in the walls. Hiding. Waiting...”

I stop short of the details when I remember that I’m speaking to a kid, and that I should probably watch how detailed I get. Especially since he’s been beaten by the flames as well. But Gus doesn’t seem frightened or upset by my story. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. His eyes widen with interest, nearly begging to hear more.

“That sounds so cool,” he says with full honesty. I want to tell him he’s wrong. That it’s *not* cool. That a roof caving in on me ruined my life.

Ruined...everything.

“I was in a car accident,” he shares, not missing a beat. “Doctors say I’m a miracle which I guess is pretty cool. Not *firefighter* cool but...”

His expression falters, disappointed he doesn’t have a *cooler* story to tell about how he got his scars. As if having a better story would make having the burns...worth it.

“I think being a miracle is pretty cool,” I say out of nowhere.

“Really?” his eyes brighten.

I nod. “Sure.”

I don't know why I said it. I don't know why I felt the need to say anything at all. Maybe because I wish someone looked at me with the same amazement at what I survived instead of the pity and horror I received. Maybe because this kid is too young to have to deal with the stares and not have the self-confidence to get through it. To have a chance at a normal life. To move forward without always looking back at what was. But then I'm reminded that *I'm* also here for that very reason. That I need to focus on my own recovery. Achieve my own goals—whatever they may be. I'm not here to be some kid's cheerleader. I don't have time for it. I sit up straighter in my chair, elongating my back and broadening my shoulders, ready to pick up my bag and move along—alone.

"Look, kid," I start but am interrupted by the sound of the office door across the room opening. Louis comes out first, holding the door open behind him. Relief comes over me that Gus and I are no longer alone and I can now make my escape without having to be harsh to the kid.

I bend down to pick up my bag but freeze at the sound of hearing *her* voice. It's soft while sputtering strong words. Smooth but laced with clipped edges as it fills the air in the room. Never has the sound of a voice stopped me cold. At work, shrieks and cries would only spur me faster into action. At home, screams and moans would only fuel my every movement. But this? This voice renders me motionless.

And the best part? She speaks with an accent.

I finally manage to straighten, standing tall while I seek out the lips that own that voice.

"Gaston," her eyes fall from Gus to me.

Gaston?

A *French* accent?

I glance back at Gus for a fleeting moment, just long enough to see his ears turn red.

"Mom, we talked about this," he says through clenched teeth.

How could this woman be his *Mom*? She's so...*beautiful*. And *young*.

Long auburn hair pulled up, off her face, showcasing her long neck. Her skin is without flaw, which isn't something you see much of around here. The paleness of her skin is only emphasized by the deep red of the rose petals printed on her blouse, her collar slightly open—hypnotizing me. Her brown eyes pop, eyelashes so long I notice them from where I stand. And I

never notice that kind of stuff. Usually my eyes move south fairly quickly, but with her, they can't seem to leave her face.

"Sorry," she does her best to hide her smile, looking down at her son. She knows she's somehow embarrassed him.

Her voice is silk. Just that one word has my mind reeling, wondering what other words would sound like coming from her lips. Her eyes flick up to me, one brow rising slightly—as though she's silently questioning *who* I am.

I wish I had the answer.

My mouth opens, hoping to at least have the chance to give my name, but Gus has other plans. His loud, humiliated exhale fills the room, bringing all eyes, including hers, back to him.

"Let's go," he says, picking up his small gym bag. He doesn't even look back as he walks towards the door, ignoring everyone he passes.

Guilt over embarrassing her son washes over her face. And for what? Calling him by his real *name*? So what if it is French and a little out of place for Middle America—it's the name she chose for him.

My vision falls south for the first time but not for the reasons you'd think. She's uncomfortably shifting around at least four books and a ridiculous amount of pamphlets from one arm to the other, trying to balance as much as she can while she roots through her purse.

"Hey, kid," I call out to Gus.

He stops and turns, just as he's about to walk through the front door.

I point toward his mother, to the books and pamphlets she's juggling in her arms. "Don't you think you should help your Mom carry some of those?"

I'd like nothing more than to go up to her and take some of that weight *literally* off her hands. To feel like a man again—chivalrous and proud. To have an excuse to get closer, experience seeing this...*beauty* from only inches away. I haven't felt that kind of want in months. Everything inside of me is pushing me to go be that man, to be that hero.

But something stops me. Something stronger than my own want. Something that tells me this had to be Gus' job...at least for this time.

Gus' eyes move from me then to his mother before he slowly makes his way over to her.

"Be a man," I say, urging—guiding him.

He takes some of the pamphlets from her, leaving the heavier books. But both she and I know it's not how much he took that matters. It's that he took anything at all that counts.

"Later, Gus," I say as he walks back toward the door.

"Bye," he says, standing a little taller.

I watch for another moment before my gaze returns back inside. Back to...her.

Her lips curl into the most beautiful smile, one corner coming higher up than the other.

Before I can even say a word, she turns and follows Gus out the door.

Behind me, I hear the clearing of a throat, reminding me that I haven't been left alone.

"Could that be the sound of a beating heart?" Louis asks, smirking.

My head whips back in his direction, my scaled neck not very appreciative of the fast movement.

"It's always a sight to see when one remembers they *are* human and not the monsters they've made themselves out to be," he says.

"What the fuck are you talking about," I scoff, grabbing my bag from the floor.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Adam," his tone even. He turns and begins walking toward the workout room, knowing I have no choice but to follow. "Feel that heartbeat. Feel the blood run through your veins. Revel in that feeling!"

"Again," I say, "what the fuck are you talking about?"

He opens the door for me, grinning from ear to fucking ear as I pass. "Today you remembered parts of who you are. Parts of the man you thought were lost."

"Whatever," I say leaving him behind, ignoring the steady, continuous pounding drum beneath my ribs.

But Louis isn't finished yet.

"And now that you've remembered, I'm going to push that man to limits he thought were out of reach. Get ready," he pauses, stepping back in front of me. "Now it's *my turn* to work the beast out of you."

THE NEXT WEEK, I get to physio early. I tell myself the harder I push myself, the more I'll succeed and the faster I can get back to...whatever is left waiting for me. But I know it's not the *only* reason. Last week, after my workout from hell, I glanced at the calendar screen to see when Gus's next appointment was. I scheduled mine for right after.

I'm such a fucking hypocrite.

I immediately find him sitting in the same seat as last time. Today, I set myself down right beside him.

"What's up, Gus?" I say, dropping my bag beside me.

"Nothing. Just waiting. Mom's in with Louis again," he nods towards the closed office door.

My eyes dart in that direction, willing them to see through wood of the door. After a few seconds, Gus speaks again.

"No one calls me that."

"Huh?" my head tilts, but my eyes are unwavering.

"*Gaston*," he replies. "No one calls me that. I don't know why she does. She knows my name is Gus. She knows that's what people to call me."

"What's wrong with Gaston?" I ask, narrowing my eyes on that door.

When he doesn't answer right away, I drag my focus away and bring it to him.

He shrugs his shoulders.

"You don't like your name?" I ask.

He takes a deep breath, shrugging his shoulders. "I used to. It's my grand-father's name. Mom says it's her way of having a bit of home through me. She used to live in France."

French accent—nailed it.

"Yeah, I noticed the accent," I say, keeping my lips sealed about all the other things I noticed about her.

"What accent?" he asks.

My brow rises in question. "Your mother's." His expression has me questioning myself. "She *does* have an accent," I say, more confidently.

"She does?"

"Yes," I nod once.

"Oh," he pauses. "Weird."

I guess I never realized the types of things kids tend to notice or not. I'm not around them very much. When he doesn't continue on with stories

about him Mom, I'm introduced to the small attention span kids, or at least Gus, seem to have.

"So your Mom's from France?" I ask, as nonchalantly as possible.

"Yeah," he nods. "We were supposed to go and visit this summer."

He doesn't need to explain further. It's quite clear what's keeping them from being able to go...anywhere.

"Maybe once you've finished healing," I offer, extending some hope to the kid.

"I doubt it. My mom's kind of going crazy over my next surgery. Won't stop reading about it."

"Well," I start. "Moms are like that. They worry."

But something tells me Gus' Mom is worried for many other reasons. Unlike my Mom who only seems concerned with how my scars affect *her*. Not the other way around.

"I know," he replies. "Sometimes I hear her crying when she's on the phone."

I swallow back a lump in my throat at hearing that.

"She doesn't know I can hear her but I can't help it. And sometimes the things she says don't make any sense."

"They don't?" I clear my throat.

He shakes his head. "One time I heard her talking about my prom. That she's worried someone will never want to go with me."

I hate that I'm now wondering the same thing. Growing up, I remember how cruel kids could be. How cruel *I* used to be. How I *was* one of those bully's Gus' Mom is worried he'll have to someday encounter.

"Adam?"

I focus back on Gus. "Yeah?"

"What's prom?"

His question surprises me. It even makes me smile a bit. "Well, it's a big dance you go to in high school. Guys get dressed up in suits and girls wear pretty dresses. It's like a fancy date."

"A dance?" he face shows just how unimpressed he is with the idea.

"Yeah," I nod.

"Mom's worried that I won't go to a dance?"

"Well, I'm sure she just thinking about—"

But Gus doesn't let me finish. "Who cares about a stupid dance?" he nearly shrieks. "Baseball season starts soon and that's what she should be

worried about. We're in Division 2 this year," he says as though I should understand what that means.

"Wow," I feign understanding. "Division 2?"

"Yes! Only the best play in Division 2," he states.

I continue to nod, pretending to be impressed.

I think back to when I was a kid and how the only thing that mattered to me was Lacrosse. Sports and being with my friends were my only concerns, so I can understand where Gus is coming from. But I'm not a kid anymore so I can kind of understand his Mom worries about his future—even if it is about something like *prom*. Gus is still too young to see the big picture. People like me and his mother have no choice *but* to face that picture. One day he'll understand. One day he'll understand the worries his Mom is having. He'll grow up and one day, without realizing it, one thing will grab his attention faster than sports or friends or Division 2.

Girls.

And when that moment happens, his Mom's worries over prom will finally make sense. They'll become his worries. Will he have the same experiences as all the other guys his age? Will girls notice him the same way others get noticed? Will he be let down? Will he see prom the same way other teenager do? The way I did? See the possibilities and probabilities. The expectation.

I think back to my own prom. To Tiffany Whitmore...

And just as my mind begins to wander about my own prom *night*, Louis' office door opens and out she comes. Today her hair is down, covering her shoulders, landing just below her breasts. She's wearing jeans and a t-shirt, much more casual than the first time I saw her. But just as beautiful.

Her brown eyes immediately find mine as she walks towards us, stopping in the middle of the room.

"Hello again," she says.

Fuck.

That accent.

"Hi," I say taking a step forward.

She looks over to Gus before turning her gaze back at me. "I hope Gus hasn't been keeping you."

Just the opposite, I think to myself. I've been keeping him in hopes of seeing you.

“Not at all,” I answer as smooth as possible.

We continue to stand as we are, neither of us moving or looking away.

“Gus,” Louis’ voice comes out of nowhere. “Come with me. I want to show you some of the new machines we just got in.”

“Do I have to?” he asks his mom, clearly uninterested.

Louis quickly glances in my direction before turning back to Gus, answering for his mother. “Yes.”

We both watch Gus and Louis disappear into the weight room, leaving me and...fucking hell, I don’t even know this woman’s name.

“I’m Adam,” I blurt out, like an idiot.

She turns back in my direction. “I know,” she responds with a half-smile before realizing she’s given herself away. “Amelie,” she says, her cheeks turning pink.

And for the first time in a long time, my ego inflates at the sight of her freshly tinted skin.

“Nice to meet you, Emily,” I say, my lips curling into a cocky smirk. Fuck, it feels good to do that again.

She lets out the smallest of laughs. “No,” she corrects, taking a step closer. “Amelie. With an *A*.”

“Amelie,” I repeat, liking that way it sounds even more rolling off my tongue.

“Gaston—Gus...he speaks of you often. At first I thought you were a therapist with how much he spoke of you—”

Her eyes shift slowly to my neck and once more, embarrassment reveals itself on her face.

“I’m sorry—” she begins.

I wave her off. “Don’t be. It’s no secret why I’m here.”

Her eyes briefly gaze at my neck once more before slowly moving down my body. I don’t think she even notices she’s doing it. But I do. Only this time, I don’t shutter or get angry. I let her examine me. I let her explore the rough ripples that now mark my skin.

“A roof caved in on me,” I explain.

She nods. “Gus told me,” she answers, looking me squarely in the eyes. But instead of pity, her eyes shine. “He idolizes you, you know.”

My eyes squint in misunderstanding. “Who?”

“Gus,” she smiles.

“He does?”

“Yes,” she begins. “After you told him about your accident, he said that’s the story he was going to tell people when asked what happened to him. That a roof collapsed on him while he was fighting the fire. He wants to be just like you.”

“He barely knows me,” I say, in disbelief.

“Not true. He’s watched you for weeks. When you finally spoke to him last week, it was all he could talk about at home. ‘Adam said this’...’Adam said that...’”

She takes another step closer. Close enough that I can make out the few freckles that spray across her nose and one that sits dangerously close to the corner of her lip. I swallow down the urge to brush my fingers over that spot.

“I had no idea,” I manage to breathe out.

And I didn’t. But I can hardly focus on Gus right now when Amelie’s scent is making me dizzy in the most fantastic fucking way. She smells like...snow. If that’s even possible considering it’s the middle of May. Fresh and clean, like a dose of cold crisp air flushing against my burning hot skin.

“You’re his hero,” she almost whispers.

My heart pounds, beating against every rib, every muscle, every barrier that stand between it and my skin.

I swallow, unable to do anything else.

“Thank you,” she says, gratefully. “You gave him something I couldn’t.”

“What’s that,” my voice sounding thick, uneven.

“The aspiration of the man he can still become.”

Her words lift the fog she wrapped around me.

Aspiration?

From me? How can that be? I’m nobody someone should want to be like. Ask anyone who knows me—knows me as I am today. I am not the hero Gus thinks I am. The hero Amelie thinks I am. I should tell her right now how wrong she is. How wrong both she and Gus are about me. Like Louis said, Gus is still so full of light and life while I’ve been living in the dark for months. Angry and alone. I’m not who they think I am. I’m not what Gus should stride to become. I should warn her—warn them both of who I really am.

What I really am.

I step closer. So close we’re nearly touching.

“Mom!” Gus’ voice carries threw the hallway, breaking us apart at lightning speed.

“Some of those machines are so cool,” he exclaims, running back into the room.

My hands clench at my hips and I look away. Gus comes to stand between us, begging for his mother’s attention.

“Are they?” she asks, refocusing her attention on him. “Well it’s a good thing Louis took the time to show you. Did you thank him?”

Gus tilts his head and looks just past his mother. “Thanks, Louis.”

“We should go, no? Papa is waiting,” she says, brushing his wavy hair back with her fingers.

Papa?

Amelie notices my reaction to the word. Even after the realizations I had, the conclusion I should walk away and leave this family with a fighting chance—a hopeful chance, jealousy burns inside, strong enough to mark my skin all over.

“Gus’ grand-father,” she finally explains. “He’s come to visit from Paris.”

I shouldn’t care. It shouldn’t matter to me who *Papa* is. But I can’t ignore the release of tension in my shoulders in reaction to her words.

“It was nice seeing you again,” her eyes blink slowly, controlled. Nothing at all like the turmoil happening inside of me.

Breathing comes on harder and I have to muster all my self-control not to let it show. I nod my head once, placing my hands in my pockets and fisting them tightly, out of sight.

We’ve hardly spoken. This is only our second meeting, and yet, she’s somehow flipped everything I’ve been feeling, everything I thought I knew about myself upside down. And I *can’t* let that continue.

I watch Amelie and Gus leave, relieved for the space but all too quickly feeling alone once again.

Pull it together, Adam.

Remember why you’re here. To mend the outside. The physical. The scars that have built themselves on my skin.

The inside...*is not* a priority.

Not right now.

A distraction, no matter how beautiful, how sexy, how *French*, is a road block. And I already have too many standing in my way.

I turn my gaze to Louis who has been watching me all along. Studying me. Seemingly able to follow my exact train of thought.

And he looks...disappointed.

“What?” I challenge, angry at myself that I still seem to care about his opinion. “I’m here for *me*,” I argue. “The work I put in is for *me*. The goals we set are for *me*. I’m entitled to that.”

I. Am. Entitled.

Louis says nothing. Only blinking several times before nodding once. And for some reason, his silence feels harsher than any words I could imagine him saying.

“Then let’s go to work and find what you’re so entitled to.”

He turns and heads to the workout room, leaving me behind with my *sense of entitlement*. It starts to creep itself around me, only not in a comforting way. Instead, it feels like I’m now suffocating in it.

TWO WEEKS GO by before I'm back at physio. Two weeks where I didn't allow myself to think about her, or him, or anything else that didn't get *me* where I need to be. I ignored the loneliness, turned my back on curiosity, and kept myself confined within the walls I created months ago.

It crumbles the instant I step into the reception area.

Wearing the blouse with the red rose petals, her hair in long waves, I now see where Gus gets his curls from. Her pink lips move as she reads over more brochures where she sits. When her focus shifts from the pamphlets in her hands to me, her lips still, as do her eyes.

It feels like an eternity but it all happens so quickly. Her mouth curling into a smile—one I *know* I've been waiting weeks to see again. And with that realization, I feel the promises I told myself start to be forgotten. I feel my walls begin to crack, my feet leading me away from everything I told myself I needed, and closer to something I didn't think I wanted.

I sit in the chair beside her, my heart pounding so hard I'm sure she can hear it.

"Hello, Adam."

The sound of those words burn my skin. I want to claw at it, tear it open just to make the scorch a little more bearable. But even if I could, it would just find another spot, another place to mark, to singe.

"Amelie," my voice faltering slightly.

Her eyes smile as her lips do. "With an A," she teases. "You remembered."

I tried so hard to forget.

I swallow, my eyes quickly scanning across the room.

"Where's Gus—"

"Adam, I wanted to apologize—"

We speak simultaneously but I'm immediately taken aback by her words.

Apologize?

To me?

"What for?" I ask, confused.

"The last time we spoke," she starts.

The only time we spoke.

"I believe I may have overstepped," she continues.

She brushes her hair behind her ear and I can't help but stare at the spot right below her earlobe. I've always loved the softness and smoothness of a woman's neck. I could never stop myself from inhaling, kissing, tasting *that* spot. And Amelie's looks the smoothest and softest of any I've ever seen.

Quickly, I divert my eyes back to hers, my body too quickly getting wound up being this close.

"Overstepped?"

She nods. "Telling you about how much Gus looks up to you. It was unfair. You have your own recovery to concentrate on. And me imposing Gaston's..." she pauses, needing time to find the right word, "his *admiration* for you," settling on her word of choice, "I took advantage. I must apologize."

I sit and stare at her for a moment. I watch as emotions I can't discern flash in her eyes. Little mysteries as to what she's thinking unexplained.

"Amelie—"

"It's just that," she ignores me, "Gaston doesn't have a man in his life he can look up to. A man who understands *what* he is going through. I try," she picks up the pile of discarded pamphlets from the chair next to her. "I read and I read and I try to understand. But how can I? How can I understand when my own feelings overshadow everything else?"

My heart begins to beat erratically. "What do you feel?"

She looks at me and finally I can discern an emotion. Only I wish I hadn't.

Panic.

"I'm terrified he'll let his scars define him. That he'll forget who he was underneath them. Who he *still* is."

Her words awake my own feelings—ones I've been trying to avoid but constantly think about. Feelings I've been running both to and from since my accident.

Who am I?

Who will I be?

Who *can* I be?

"I so desperately want Gaston to believe that what is reflected on the outside isn't what needs to be reflected on the inside," she says. "I know that seems silly...with all the surgeries I'm about to put him through."

"It's not," I cut in. "I understand it. I can understand your need to give him as much of a normal life as possible. I'm sure it's not easy making all

the hard decisions by yourself.”

She smiles sadly, but there is also relief there. Relief that someone else sees and understands the sacrifices she’s making for her son—for his future.

As men, we define ourselves by what we can do. But more often than not, it’s by what we can’t or can no longer do that stands out. It’s easy to lose self-worth when those lines get blurred.

Without any notice or even an ounce of warning, Amelie’s hand reaches up and her fingertips delicately graze my scarred neck. “This is not who you are either,” she says, her voice definite but only loud enough to touch my ears.

Slowly, my hand reaches up—my immediate reaction to remove her soft touch. But I surprise myself and then her when I slip my fingers between hers and press them harder into my skin.

“I don’t know who I am anymore,” I admit, honestly. “I’m not the same Adam I was.”

“Perhaps. But you’re still a man. A good man,” she states.

Our eyes lock and the need to be closer still overwhelms me. The urge for more of her touch reminds me of the craving I’ve tried hard to forget.

“Yes,” I breathe. “A man. But I’m not so sure about the *good*.”

She licks her lips and in that moment, I feel like nothing would or could stop me from kissing her. Nothing would or could stop me from taking her in my arms and burying my face into the curve of her neck. Inhaling her scent, tasting her skin.

I was a fool to think I could live a life without this feeling. This want.

“Amelie,” I whisper.

She opens to her mouth just a fraction—but enough to let me know it’s an invitation. And not one I want to turn down. Not this time. I drop my head, ready to take her lips and forget anything and everything else. Forget who we are and why we are here. Today, instead of getting all wrapped up in who I am or who I’ve become, I want to get wrapped up in who she thinks I could be. Just as I’m about to take what I want, the door to the workout room opens, and Gus’ loud, booming voice fills the room.

We instantly break apart—like a couple of teenagers caught with the lights off in our parent’s house. I move quickly on rearranging the crotch of my pants, embarrassed at how quick she is able to affect me. I take a deep breath while Amelie stands, blocking me from view.

“Hey, Adam,” Gus says, his mother’s attempt to shield me failing miserably.

“Hey, kid,” I smile tightly, tempering my hard on before I stand.

Thankfully, he’s too oblivious to notice.

“How was today?” Amelie asks, dropping down to Gus’ level.

Unfortunately for me, that leaves her jean clad ass directly in my line of sight, not helping my current situation.

Gus’ face falls, disappointment clearly evident. “You were right,” he starts. “Louis says it’s too soon.”

Amelie’s head tilts to the side in a sympathetic gesture. “I’m sorry, *Mon Cheri*,”

Gus’ disappointment is too much to for him to even notice another one of his mother’s nickname. And if he isn’t making a deal out of that, he must really be upset.

“What’s the problem, kid?” I ask, finally able to stand.

“Today’s our first game,” he looks up at me. “I can’t play.”

Baseball season. Division two.

Amelie turns her head and looks up at me. “We can’t risk him getting hurt. Not before surgery,” she explains.

I nod, understanding.

“And I won’t be able to play after surgery either,” Gus states, sadly.

“The whole season will be over before I can even play.”

His disappointment feels like a punch to the gut. And with everything he’s been through, still, his only desire is to be with his friends on the field.

“You should go to the game,” I say.

“But everyone said I can’t play,” he argues, looking over to Amelie.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t go and be part of the team. Take a seat on the bench. Be the backbone.”

“What’s the point in that?”

My eyes flicker from Gus back to Amelie. Her earlier words flood my mind.

“Because you are still the same player. And your teammates still need you. A team is nothing without its backbone.”

Amelie smiles at me before turning back towards Gus. “Would you like that? We could go and watch. I’ll help you cheer,” she offers, excited at the prospect of Gus being a part of his team, even if it is in a different capacity.

Gus’ eyes come up to meet mine. “Will you come, too?” he asks me.

The invite I was not expecting. And judging by the way Amelie is reacting to my surprised expression, I didn't hide it well either.

"*Cheri*, I'm sure Adam has things he needs to do—" she begins, offering me an out.

An *out* I once wanted. An *out* I'm not so sure about anymore.

"Sure, kid," I hear myself say.

Amelie looks my way, and for the second time today, I'm able to discern another emotion in her eyes. One I want to see over and over again.

Joy.

"Awesome!" Gus exclaims. "We play at Dunmore Field. Six o'clock, right Mom?"

She looks back at Gus, her smile wide at his excitement. "Right, *Cheri*."

"Cool! Let's go get ready. I want to wear my uniform!" He grabs Amelie's hand and nearly pulls her out the door. Too fast for her to say anything else, too quick to give what happened between us any more attention. But the last look we give each other tells us that we won't forget it either.

Once they're out the door, I turn and I'm faced with Louis and that shit-eating grin again.

"Don't start," I threaten.

"Start what?" his eyes flare in amusement.

"It's nothing," I lie. "Let's just forget it."

Louis presses his lips together and nods, trying to hold in his laughter—and failing.

"What?" I seethe. "What's so funny?"

His laughter subsides as he folds his arms over his chest. "I just thought it would be the woman to remind you of who you are. I was wrong."

My eyes narrow, not following.

"It was the boy," he explains. "All it took was a boy who needed a hero to remind you of something very important."

"And what's that," I ask, feigning mild interested.

"That you *are* one."

AFTER FINDING A place to park not far from the field, I make my way over to the baseball diamond. I can hear the screaming and the cheering getting louder and louder with every step. Parents clapping and cheering with every ding of the ball hitting the bat.

Fuck. The game has started already.

I look down at my hand, at the reason for my lateness.

I stop midstride, suddenly feeling nervous. And incredibly stupid.

This isn't a date.

I'm here to watch ten year olds play baseball. I'm here to cheer on a boy who probably needs it more than any other player on this field, and he won't even get a chance at the plate. But when I see her sitting up in the stands, sunglasses shading her beautiful eyes, clapping along with all the other parent's in the crowd, I know it's not the only reason.

Amelie sees me as I climb up the bleachers. Even though her eyes are covered, I can sense she's staring at what's in my hand. I don't say a word when I hand her the single red rose.

She accepts it with a simple smile, but one that screams a thousand words. A thousand words only we can hear.

I take my seat beside her, removing my hood. And when I sit, I purposefully brush our legs together. I'm relieved when she doesn't move to separate them.

"How are we doing?" I ask.

"Terrible," she answers proudly. "We are already losing. But look at him," she nods towards Gus in the dugout, all decked out in his uniform, talking and laughing with his teammates. "He hasn't stopped smiling."

A warm feeling I don't recognize rushes through me.

"You did this," she states, gratefully.

I shake my head in disagreement, but I don't pursue the argument any further. I choose to enjoy the moment instead.

"Thank you for the rose," Amelie says quietly, holding the long stem out in front of us, the deep red of the petals amplified by the light of the setting sun.

"It matched your shirt," I say, looking back out to the field. But out of the corner of my eye, I see one petal fall, floating slowly to the ground. We both watch as the petal lands on the green grass beneath us.

"Only that one," she says, examining the rose. "The rest are...perfect."

I nod and look back out to the field. I can't see her but I know she's smiling. Most likely biting her lip, too. I know this, because I know the affect *I* used to have on beautiful women. The affect a *man* has on a beautiful woman.

I may not be the hero Gus or Louis have declared me to be. I may not be the Prince Charming Amelie may have made me out to be. Maybe I'm not even the *Beast* I made myself out to be. Today, for the first time in a long time, I feel like *Adam*. I feel like a *man*. And when Amelie's hand slowly makes its way to my knee and stays there, I know that I can *still* be a man who affects a beautiful woman.

The End.

Caroline Nolan writes stories about love and all the beauty and ugliness that comes along with it. She lives in Toronto with her husband and their fur baby. She is currently working on her third novel which is still untitled.

Other Works by Caroline Nolan

This Is Love

“This Is Love is an AMAZING debut novel that is wonderfully unique and spellbindingly beautiful. Readers looking for an epic love, that is flawless in both the written word and the characters created; a real gem that embeds itself into your heart and soul, should pick up this book. I promise that it is one that will stick with you for a long time to come.” ~ Shh Moms Reading

“Caroline Nolan wrote this with such an exquisite, gentle touch; it left me *so* happy, my heart completely overflowing and a giant smile on my face. If you’re looking for a breathtaking, stunning story about loss, healing, hope and the capacity of the heart to love limitlessly—THIS IS WHAT YOU NEED!” ~ Give Me Books

“I had no idea what to expect when I started reading this book... I hadn’t even read the blurb. But from the first sentence, I was hooked. I devoured every page like I was starving.” ~ Cover to Cover Book Blog

Everything Unexpected

“Have you read one of those books that just make your heart happy? Everything Unexpected was just that.” ~ Beneath the Covers Book Blog

“Everything Unexpected is a bit different from her first novel but that’s what I loved. This is a friends to lover’s romance but I think with a bit of a twist. It was a sweet and fun read.” ~ Three Chicks and Their Books

“Everything Unexpected is a sweet best friends-to-lovers story, with its fair share of heat and angst. I enjoyed watching them find their way and figure out what is most important to them. I laughed, smiled, teared up a little, and straight out gushed!” ~ Of Pens and Pages Book Blog

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the thief and the marauder

Amanda Richardson

A TALE OF a book thief who is kidnapped by a rival bandit and learns the meaning of true sacrifice.

The Thief and the Marauder
Amanda Richardson
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Prologue

ONCE THERE WAS, one day there will be: this is the beginning of every fairy tale. There is no *if* and no *perhaps*, so we shall begin by saying this. Far away and into the future, through black smoke and the skeletons of cities past, in a land torn apart and shattered, lived a woman and her best friend. . .

Part One

I TRACE THE outlines of golden horses with my right index finger. The fraying wallpaper is tattered and worn, the coarse, once-ivory fabric now yellowed with age. If I concentrate hard enough, I'm able to quell the worry building inside of me, ready to burst with apprehension like always. I'm always jittery while I wait for Godric to return, hopefully unharmed. *Where is he?* Sitting on the couch with one leg under me, I swing the other back and forth nervously, biting my bottom lip until it's raw. I examine my apartment while I wait. It has the bones of once-resplendent wealth, though juxtaposed with that is the sheer age of the place and the reality of living on the twenty-second story of a decrepit building. One of the walls was blown out in one of the wars. I am told it had been grand in its day, and since moving in three years ago, I did my best at making it a comfortable place for Godric and me to live, even without my father's money.

A gust of wind flutters across the room, the single open wall providing no shelter from the dry, evening summer wind. *Where is he?* Our front door explodes inward, revealing my best friend. I jump up and run to him.

"Well?" I ask impatiently, pacing in front of him as he drops the brown, burlap sacks of stolen books at my feet. "What took you so long?"

"That's it? No gratitude? You're shameless. How about, '*Thank you, Godric, for being brave and raiding the house of an elite. Oh, and your hair looks fabulous, by the way.*' Is that really so hard?" he pouts, coiffing his hair up and around his head like an arrogant fool.

My lips quirk to the side. "Your hair does look disturbingly perfect," I admit, reaching down for the sack. "It's troubling, really. You're a mastermind thief who burglarizes the rich, and yet somehow, you manage to keep every hair in place." I reach into the large bag and my heart begins to race. So many newfangled stories and adventures, so much potential on the bootleg pages. "I assume you were able to avoid the curfew guards?" I pull one of the books out and begin to thumb the crisp paper. I can tell it's never been touched. The ignorant, wealthy fools are the only ones allowed to have books, and yet the books they possess remain unread. Such a travesty.

Godric smiles slyly, removing his black trench coat and placing it over a sitting chair. “Do you even have to ask?” He unbuttons the top button of his shirt and kicks off his boots, knocking black soot onto the freshly mopped concrete. “This place was *loaded* with books, Maybelle. I’m talking *stacks* of them.”

I grin. “Can we go back tomorrow?” *Tomorrow isn’t soon enough.*

He shakes his head. “Not while you’re being watched so closely.” He rubs his chin. “Plus, you know I’m a better thief,” he admonishes, quirking an eyebrow.

I don’t hesitate as I grab a pillow from the couch and chuck it at his face. “Bullshit.”

He dodges it quickly before turning to walk to his corner of our large, open, one-room loft. “Knock yourself out with those,” he drones languidly, pointing to the sack. “I’m going to sleep. Thievery is exhausting sometimes. Goodnight, princess.” He disappears behind his partition before I can respond.

I watch the divide for a minute before retreating to my cot behind my own partition, grabbing the thickest book of the bunch. Curling up under my threadbare blanket, I begin to read the faded text, lost in the words of a foreign time—even if it is a pirated, beat up version of the original. Most of the time, the books we steal have pages missing or writing scrawled in the margins, and this particular copy is stapled together haphazardly. I’ve never seen an original. Most of them have disappeared over time.

Thief.

Princess.

I suppose both words describe me accurately. I spend my days as the daughter of the Elite leader and my nights befriending the vermin of the city, stealing books from the people who will never appreciate them. Our ramshackle apartment and my independence is my attempt to distance myself from the Elite and their disuniting ways, but that doesn’t stop my father from keeping tabs on me and imposing pointless curfews as a protection measure. Though he may not know about my illicit, nightly activities, he still manages to keep a tight leash on me. Which is why Godric orchestrates the difficult heists by himself, like tonight.

My father has good reason to worry. The divide between the Elite and the rest of society had thrown up an invisible wall, and it made the forgotten

angry. Particularly, the Marauders—a group of rebel bandits who loot and rob anyone and anything they can get their hands on. Barbaric criminals.

They were responsible for my mother's murder and I vowed to myself long ago that one day, I would avenge her death.

I skim the pages of the book as my mind begins to spin. *This place was loaded with books, Maybelle. I'm talking stacks of them.* I am admittedly greedy when it comes to books. Godric does it for the thrill, but I steal books because of the escape. I *need* them. In these fictional worlds, I'm not the daughter of an out-of-touch leader. I can be whoever I want to be.

Checking the clock on our mantel, I see that it's nearly two in the morning. I've been restless all night. I toy with the idea of leaving. I am an addict, and books are my drug. *Stacks of books*, he said. I couldn't possibly. Godric would kill me if he knew what I was thinking of doing. *What Godric doesn't know won't kill him, right?* Jumping out of bed, I throw on my usual outfit—tight, black pants, lace-up boots, a black hoodie, and a black beanie that I tuck my long, brown, braided hair into. I grab a lock pick and a sack for the books I expect to steal. As quietly as possible, I lock the door behind me, hiding the key on top of one of the hallway lanterns. It's our protocol, more for Godric's sake than mine. He's more likely to be questioned by a curfew guard, whereas they would let me go because of who my father is. But, books are illegal in our city now, at least for the non-Elite. When I fought for my independence at the age of eighteen, I also gave up my Elite status. The last thing I want is my father or one of his lackeys to find out about the giant stash we have hidden away. They might not be so forgiving if they knew Godric and I spent our nights breaking into their homes and stealing their literature.

I take the stairs like I do every time, ensuring the guards at the bottom of the elevator don't see me. Twenty-two stories. My knees are wobbling by the time they hit ground level. I look for the guards—brainless soldiers hired by my father who spend their shifts looking at naked women in magazines instead of doing their job. It certainly makes my life easier. Tonight, they're leaning back in their plush chairs and laughing. Paying absolutely no attention to the stairwell. As infuriating as it is to be watched, I know my father does it out of love. In exchange for my independence, I will gladly take a couple of simple-minded guards. I slither against the wall to the front door, and once I'm through, I stay within the shadows of

abandoned streets. I skirt from building to building, jogging quickly so that no one sees me until I reach the Elite quarters a mile or so away. The city, or what was once a city, is quiet and ghost-like at night—empty, dark, and run-down. But once I enter the other side, though, I notice the difference immediately. The roads—paved. The buildings—new. The shrubs—trimmed. The carriages lining the ornate driveways of the multiple-story, single-family homes are opulently shiny. It makes me sick. No wonder I left it all behind.

I find the house that Godric sneaked into—a large, brick, three-story mansion with white trim and rose bushes lining the walls. I study it through the black gate. Walking along the perimeter, I try to find a gap in the neat hedges surrounding the estate. There isn't one, so I pull my hood over my head and climb through the bush until I emerge on the other side, a little worse for wear. Glancing around, I sprint across the open lawn quickly until I'm crouching on the porch. There's a dirt path which I know snakes along the side of the house and into the backyard. From there, it's all a matter of picking the lock of the back door and being as quiet as possible. Unlike the Marauders, Godric and I try our hardest not to disturb anything. We prefer that the people we steal from never know it. Just last week, a Marauder put a brick through the window of an Elite house. So unprofessional.

I follow the path to the back. Taking out my pick, I hear the magical 'click' in a matter of seconds. Pushing the door open slowly, I narrow my eyes as they adjust to the space and darkness.

Every so often, I mourn for the easy life I lived for eighteen years. There were no blown out walls, no chilly nights, no going to sleep hungry because my janitorial job didn't pay well enough—we get all the jobs the Elite don't want. My father, who raised me by himself after my mother died five years ago, was a good father. Seeking my independence at eighteen wasn't all because of him, though we did always disagree on policy. It was just something I had to do, something I'd wanted my whole life. I had no desire to lead the Elite as his heir, and so it was also my only option if I wanted a life of my own. While I do have it better than most people on my side of town, I am conscious in times like these of what I gave up for freedom. Air conditioning. Heat. New furniture. New clothes.

I step into the modern kitchen and open the refrigerator. In it is more food than a house of this size will ever eat before it goes bad. I close the

door quietly. I didn't come here for food. Even though they'd never notice, it's against our rules.

Only books.

And only the books of the Elite.

I wander through the rest of the first story silently. The study—where most of the Elite keep their books like souvenirs—must be on the second story. I climb the wide staircase and tiptoe through the hallway until I reach a set of double doors. Swallowing, I push them open and step into an office. Placing a hand over my mouth, I take in the dark room lit only by a lamp outside streaming through the window. Godric was right. There are literal *stacks* of books everywhere, all of which seem untouched. Copies of course, but I don't care. I walk over and pluck a few off of the shelf, gently placing them into the sack I brought. Maybe it's the adrenaline distracting me, making me unusually negligent, but whatever the case, I don't notice the other person in the large room until their shadow cuts across the light from the street, and by then, it's too late.

"You," a low voice growls, breath hot on my ear. I try to turn, try to fight, but he holds me to his chest firmly and tightens his grip as I struggle.

"Let me go," I bark, kicking back and trying my best to fight my way out.

"Not a chance." He leans down and his breath once again grazes my ear. I bare my teeth, but before I have a chance to retort, he continues. "I came only for the books, but now it seems I'll be leaving with the books *and* a princess."

"Who do you work for?" I seethe.

He chuckles—a low, deadly noise. From my peripheral, I can see that he's wearing a large cloak with a hood covering his face. Fear sinks its talons into me.

A Marauder.

He'll never give me the satisfaction of an answer, and I now wish I didn't know. My heart stills. The Marauders have no system, no recourse for their actions. They *kill*. Petty criminals. I'm as good as dead.

"Come with me." He turns and tugs me roughly behind him. His figure is gargantuan—his hood up over his face. My eyes slide to his bare hands. They're twisted in scars. He must sense my observation because he draws both hands beneath the hem of his cloak. He moves through the study door with feline grace despite the fact that he's easily a foot taller than me. I trail

him the whole way. I don't really have a choice. Screaming, yelling, *fighting*, would only disturb the Elite who live here, and then we'd both be in deep shit. The Marauder doesn't slow, not until we get outside. A black carriage is waiting beyond the gate for—

For me.

“Please,” I ask, raspy desperation leaking into my voice. He ignores me as he pushes the gate open to let us through and climbs into the luxurious carriage. I hesitate.

Run.

But before my feet even move, a low snarl emits from within the carriage—yellow-green eyes meeting mine in the darkness. A dog. Of course. I can't outrun a dog. All Marauders have dogs. I *knew* that. A beast for a beast. I climb into the carriage with trembling limbs and mild curiosity, and once the door is closed, the man sits down and removes his hood.

I don't contain my scream.

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THE CARRIAGE JOSTLES me uncomfortably as we meander through the dark streets. I have to sit on my shaking hands and focus on the carpeted floor. . .

I will not look.

Will not look.

Will not. . .

I sneak a glance at the man, who is paying me no attention. My scream hadn't startled him—he must be used to it. A twinge of pity courses through me and then disappears. A *Marauder*. He doesn't deserve my pity. Even if his face looks waxen, as though someone took a candle and melted his skin. His hair is normal, his lips. . . twisted into a cruel smile. His nose is slightly misshapen, but his eyes are normal. I can't decipher the color of his irises in the darkness. Whatever happened to him, whatever scarred him, must've been terrible. . .

No.

Clearing my throat, I sit up straighter and look around. “Where are we headed, then? I'm not really sure where Marauders hang out. Perhaps the depths of hell?” I want him to know that I know he's a Marauder. He doesn't acknowledge me. I squash the fear rising up in my throat like bile. The windows in the carriage have curtains, but they're pulled shut, and even if they weren't, I doubt I'd be able to orient myself in the darkness. “How'd you get those scars?” I ask innocently.

At this, he meets my gaze, and his nostrils flare angrily. “I beg your pardon?” His accent. . . I've never heard it.

“Where are you from?” I blurt, narrowing my eyes.

“Stop asking questions.”

Just then, the carriage comes to a shuddering stop, and my pulse whooshes past my ears as the door is thrown open. The man gestures for me to go first, but I hesitate. I have no idea what awaits me. I stay seated. As he crawls out, he sighs and glares at me with an annoyed expression. I follow him out once I know I won't be stepping into a pit of snakes, and the dog skirts along behind me, tail wagging and whining for attention. If it hadn't tried to bite my head off earlier, I might've found it to be endearing.

The sky has lightened. Morning. How long had we been in the carriage? I look around, trying to establish my location, but I don't recognize any of it. We're in the eastern part of the city—that I know. I can tell by the way the light flits along the windows of buildings here, bright and burning even in the early dawn. The buildings are shorter than those where I live, but the windows are similarly cracked. Walls have been blown out, and colorful graffiti decorates every square inch of the outer walls. The man turns and watches me as I take it all in, his hood up over his face again.

"Follow me," he orders, whipping around and walking towards a large warehouse on the end of the street. No windows—four stories. Faded text skirts along the top of the establishment, but it's otherwise void of graffiti. That's when I notice the armed guards standing on every corner.

"What's your name?" I ask, clenching and unclenching my fists at my side as we quickly walk towards one of the guards. I should be running. I should be trying to get back to Godric. But something about him—about the Marauders—has me intrigued.

"Samson Voltaire," he answers. "And you're Maybelle Montcroix. Daughter of Elias Montcroix, King of the Elite."

I scowl. "He prefers *leader*," I counter, crossing my arms. "*King* evokes the wrong kind of attention."

Samson's lips twist into a knowing smile. He's actually quite handsome despite his raggedness. And young. If he weren't a Marauder, I might find him attractive. "But he is a King nonetheless. Which makes you a princess. And worth a lot of money."

"I was released from my duties as his daughter when I sought emancipation three years ago," I chide. "My cousin will take over the throne when my father passes. So, I'm sorry to say, I'm worthless to you and your cause."

He watches me for a second before answering. Blue. His eyes are blue, crystal clear and warm. "What were you doing in the house of a prominent Elite dressed as though you were about to rob a bank? And why were you stealing books?"

We walk straight past the guard, who bows to Samson before opening a door to the warehouse. "You have your secrets. I have mine," I answer. He chuckles in response.

My eyes adjust to the soft, indoor light as I take in my surroundings. It's a loft-style space, much like my apartment except on a much bigger scale.

The decorations and furniture are masculine, simple, and modern. The space is divided by pillars, and a few people are milling about. A high-pitched buzz fills the air, and when I look to my right, I see someone in a chair getting tattooed.

Raising my eyebrows, I look over at Samson. He just smirks and ushers me in. “You’re worth more alive, in case you’re wondering what I’m going to do with you,” he starts, walking with the sort of swagger I’ve only ever seen on one other person—my father. “As the King of Marauders, I’ve publicly declared war on the Elite, and I’ll stop at nothing for my cause. I’d wager that kidnapping the princess of Elias Montcroix just got me a hell of a lot closer to my goals.”

I laugh. “I’m worth *nothing*,” I spit, glaring at him. “Like I said, I severed my ties to the Elite three years ago.”

Samson halts and takes a step closer. I respond by backing up, but it doesn’t matter. He has me cornered against a pillar. “I think you’re worth more than you’re letting on. Your father loves you. Elite or not, he would do anything to save your life.”

He’s right. That’s why there are probably hundreds of guards scrambling around the city right this very second, looking for me. I pray Godric had the right sense to hide the books before they undoubtedly questioned him. A warm hand lands on my shoulder, and I jump because it’s not Samson’s. I swing around. An older Marauder stands behind me with a pair of handcuffs.

“I want no part as your pawn in this useless game,” I spit in Samson’s direction. The feel of cold metal on my wrists sends a sliver of fear down my spine, but the guard doesn’t move to snap them closed.

“Take her to the basement,” Samson orders, turning and leaving as the guard removes the handcuffs in a huff. I look at him over my shoulder, debating whether or not I should kill him when I get the chance. If I’m going to kill King of Marauders, I might as well kill his guard. *King*. The leader of my father’s biggest enemy. A war between the two of them might very well end the world.

“Sir,” the guard replies, looking horrified. “Are you sure the basement is the best place for her? Perhaps she would be more comfortable in one of the guest rooms. And don’t even get me started on *these*.” He dangles the handcuffs and scowls.

Okay, so perhaps I’ll spare his life for that.

“Take her wherever you please, Luciano.” At that, Samson stalks off, his black cape flowing behind him.

“Thank you,” I utter, as Luciano directs me towards a staircase at the back of the warehouse. Luciano nods at the men standing guard at the base of the stairs. *God*. This place is swarming with guards. I’d never be able to run.

“You’re welcome,” he replies, giving me a warm smile. He’s tall and thin, and he’s wearing leather pants and a matching jacket. Tattoos snake along his hands and up his neck. “Sam can be. . . difficult. . . at times. But please know that his intentions are noble.”

I stop climbing the winding staircase and stare at the man before me. “Noble? He’s holding me for ransom.”

“For now,” Luciano utters. “He looks tough, but he has a soft heart.”

My mind spins as Luciano beckons me down a long, plain hallway made up entirely of concrete, pipes, and vents. I follow him.

“How long does he plan on keeping me? If he’s so noble, why not just let me go?” I whisper, suddenly so tired.

Luciano watches me with curiosity. His eyes are the shade of liquid gold. His white-blond hair is long and pulled into a low ponytail. He leads me into a grandiose bedroom fit for a princess. I frown at the audacity. The concrete walls are a bit cracked, but it’s a complete room nonetheless. No holes. A large bed with a gorgeous, wrought-iron frame stands under a large window with white, gauzy drapes, along with a white wardrobe to my right, a dresser to the left, and a delicate sheepskin rug on the floor. A bathroom sits off to the side, and from here I can see the large bathtub.

“I can’t even begin to understand the workings of his mind, princess. You’ve had a long night. Rest up. Dinner is at six sharp.”

I cross my arms. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Luciano watches me for a beat before sighing. “Because I like you. And I think as much as Samson loathes your father, he really does want to find a way to work with him without resorting to violence. You are the key, Miss. Montcroix.” With that, he walks out and closes the door.

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I SLEEP LIKE the dead for the rest of the day. By the time evening falls, I am alert and ready for whatever Samson has in store. Bathing quickly in the fancy, oval bath, I step into the softest towel before finding clothes and a note on the bed. Who had come in while I was in the bath? My cheeks flush as I read the scratchy handwriting.

Here are some clothes to wear for dinner. You don't strike me as a dress person, so enjoy the pants.

-Sam

I pull on the black trousers made of some kind of wool—it's cooler today, and the sun will be below the horizon soon, so they're much appreciated. Next is a knit, white sweater that feels like woolen silk. The material is so fine, I'm afraid it'll unknit itself as I bend over to pull on the leather ballet flats. *Damn him.* They're the most comfortable clothes I've ever worn, and how in the hell did he know my size? I study my reflection in the gilded mirror next to the wardrobe. The clothes flatter me. They're very fancy, and I wonder how much ransom money he's accrued over the years to be able to afford such finery.

I leave my room at five minutes to six. When I pull the door open, I step out and bound right into a short, squat man with a trimmed beard and mustache.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry—" he squawks.

"It was my fault," I say, giving him a timid smile. He returns it. I look around. "Would you happen to know where dinner is being served?"

"It's right this way," he says quickly, beckoning for me to follow him. "I am supposed to escort you to your meals." He leads me down a modern hallway on the opposite side of my bedroom. Concrete floors, floor to ceiling windows. He speaks to me over his shoulder as we turn a corner. "I'm Horace, by the way. Samson's personal assistant.

"Maybelle. Nice to meet you."

"Please excuse the prince's behavior this morning. The basement—I mean, *really*," he scoffs, grinning. "He means well."

"So I've heard," I mumble, crossing my arms.

“I’ll leave you here,” he says quickly, nodding to the closed, aluminum double doors. “Samson is already inside.” He pauses and cocks his head to the side. He’s wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a faded t-shirt. Like Luciano, he has tattoos on almost every surface of his skin beside his face. “It’s been awhile since he’s had a dinner guest. Years, even. I apologize in advance for his appearance.” At that, Horace scuttles briskly away.

I stare at the doors. Slowly, I raise my palm and push against one of the panels, and the dining room that meets my eye takes my breath away.

Floor-to-ceiling windows line the room, exaggerating the sunset and casting a hazy, orange glow over the glass top table and iron chairs. A large chandelier—bigger than the carriage that drove us here—sits above us, and hundreds of flickering candles set the mood. The table is set for two—Samson is already seated at the far end, wearing what looks like the very same clothes he kidnapped me in. His short, brown hair is ruffled—the sides are cut shorter, and the top flops over his forehead. He’s watching me with mild annoyance. I glance at the other end, where the other setting awaits, and I’m glad to be so far from him. I sit down slowly, glancing around every so often to take everything in. The dog sits at the King’s feet.

“Thank you for the clothes,” I say quickly, fidgeting with the iron silverware.

“Well, I figured it was that or those awful street clothes you were wearing last night,” he answers, his deep voice cool. I wait for the hint of humor, but it doesn’t come, and my cheeks flush. In the bathroom earlier, I’d seen the cuts on my cheek from the hedges, the dried blood. I had to untangle my hair from the twigs and leaves when I washed it. I must’ve looked—

No. I’m not going to let him make me feel bad about my earlier appearance when clearly he didn’t even bother to put on a change of clothes for supper.

“Yes, well, I can see that appearances are very important to you,” I retort, adding a bite to my words as I roll my eyes from his face to his filthy shoes.

He scowls. “I’ve been out all day, doing work for the Marauders. I’ve only just come in, and I didn’t want to be late.”

Just then, a woman barges in with a food trolley. My stomach lurches. I didn’t realize just how hungry I was until the smell of roasted chicken hits my senses. I barely register her words to me as she serves potatoes, chicken,

meat pies, fresh green peas, and other delicacies I haven't tasted in years. My mouth fills with saliva.

"...like to drink?" the woman asks. I blink once, realizing she was asking me a question.

"Excuse me?" I give her an apologetic smile.

"To drink, princess. What would you like to drink?" Samson grinds out through gritted teeth. I shoot him a look of contempt.

"Anything is fine, thank you," I tell her.

She pours me a glass of sparkling wine the color of gold. "I'm Anna Pottsend, the cook. If you need anything, you are welcome in the kitchen anytime." She gives me a wide grin before serving Samson. Once she's finished placing an ungodly amount of food on his plate, she exits the room, leaving me alone with my kidnapper. I contemplate the ways I could kill him with the three-pronged fork, but my grumbling stomach distracts me. Samson begins to eat, and so I follow suit. Murder can wait.

I must be making a fool of myself because soon Samson stops eating and stares at me in horror as I shovel the food into my mouth with little to no thought. I stop mid-bite.

"What?" I ask, my mouth full of chicken.

"You act as though you haven't eaten in weeks." His voice is tinged with pity.

I swallow. "Yes, well, independence isn't exactly lucrative. Once I left the Elite, I had to take a janitorial job—much like the rest of the people on that side of the city. I don't mind it, but my roommate and I—"

"Roommate?" Samson asks, his eyebrows shooting up.

A rivulet of anger works through me. "Does that surprise you?"

He sets his fork down and places his palms face down on the table. "It does," he says slowly. "Your father lets you starve? If you're struggling to get by, and he can afford to appoint guards to watch you, why doesn't he step in when you need help?"

I look down. "Because I told him not to. And, because he doesn't know."

Samson's eyes rove over my face, studying me intently. "If he knew, do you think he'd step in?"

"Of course," I breathe.

Samson smiles, and I notice a small dimple on his right cheek. "I think I've just discovered my bargaining chip."

I shake my head. “You’re kidding yourself if you think you can convince him to play nice,” I rebuke, grabbing my fork and continuing to eat.

“I might not be able to convince him, but *you* can.”

My fork clatters down to the table and I stare at him. “Excuse me?”

His smile grows. Well, there’s the other dimple. Damn him. “You just summarized your life for me, Maybelle, and I realized something. You sought independence because maybe you had a friend or two on the other side—you wanted to *earn* your life. You didn’t agree with some of the things he was doing, so you left.” I stay silent. Godric wasn’t born an elite, and he was a big reason why I gave everything up. “So, at eighteen, you emancipated yourself and cut ties with the throne, but your father loves you too much to let you go completely, so he sent a few guards to watch over you. Stubbornness and pride have kept him in the dark about your conditions, but once you tell him, once you explain the plight of our people, he might be convinced to make some actual changes. If anyone can persuade him, it’ll be you. It’s perfect. You were born an Elite, and you’ll convince him as a Marauder. The best of both worlds.”

I balk. “A Marauder? I’d rather die a thousand deaths.”

His smile fades. “You and I? We’re not that different. I may have a bigger platform. I’m in charge of more people. But we’re fighting for the same thing. If we weren’t, I wouldn’t have caught you stealing books.” Samson’s hands are clasped in front of him and he’s watching me with interest. “That is what you were doing, wasn’t it?”

Shit.

“And what, exactly is your cause? Last I heard, you were throwing bricks through windows, looting shops, and murdering people. How do you expect my father to take you seriously when you’re basically a glorified pirate?”

Samson stands suddenly and walks around the table to where I’m seated. The large dog follows, looking between the two of us and whining. “Your father is not a bad man, princess. He just gets a lot of bad advice from people who wish to see our people sink further into despair. Making books illegal was one way to destabilize us. The less we read, the less we question things. I don’t believe he did it out of maliciousness. I believe he did it out of ignorance. And his advisors think that if you and I were to read, we’d resist the divide, which would be bad for them,” Samson begins,

rubbing his lips with his fingers. I try not to stare at his scars, the marred skin that should be smooth.

I clear my throat and look down at my hands. Maybe we're not so different after all. "I was young. I didn't really understand what was happening until it was too late. Everyone on your—*our*—side turned against each other. Explosions, gun fights, all-out war. . . and it got worse every day. When I was eighteen, I decided that I didn't belong as an Elite. I wanted to be brave. I wanted to fight for something. So, I left. My best friend Godric and I began to steal books. At first, it was just a silly, rebellious thing I did after being pampered for eighteen years. Then, it grew into a movement—and I got addicted to the adrenaline high. And the stories." I stop and look up at him. "The Marauders do not protect art—they pillage houses and burn things, *kill* people," I whisper. "Or at least that's what I've been told."

Samson just smirks. His face, though uneven, has the foundation of handsomeness. A sharp nose, angled jaw, plush lips, and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. "We never harmed a soul. Our reputation was perpetuated by your father's people."

"My father told me a Marauder killed my mother. He told me—"

"He lied," Samson interjects.

My face blanches. "Why?" I ask, my voice quiet. Samson's prickly stare heats me. He's watching me with something in his expression. Compassion, perhaps? Everything I believed growing up was a lie. The person I wanted to kill just this morning was now helping me. I don't know what to make of that.

"Are you finished eating?" he asks, shuffling his feet and arching an eyebrow.

I nod. "I've lost my appetite."

He chuckles. "Have you always been this dramatic, or is it a recent development?"

I crack a smile. "It seems to be a side effect of being near you," I snipe back, scowling.

He tilts his head and grabs my hand. The warmth shocks me, and I almost pull away, but his smile widens and his lips twist to the side conspiratorially. *Damn*. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Part Two

I FOLLOW SAMSON out of the dining room and down the hallway of glass. He dropped my hand moments ago, but I can still feel him—the rough callouses, the heat. Shaking my hands out, we climb the winding staircase in silence. The dog runs ahead, wagging its tail as we climb to meet it. I’m still digesting his words from a few moments ago. Why would my father lie about my mother’s death? Samson leads me up another flight of stairs to the top story of the warehouse. I hesitate for a second, wondering if perhaps this has all been a trick. Just as I’m about to ask where we’re going, Samson turns abruptly and I nearly collide with his hard body.

“I know you think I’m the enemy, Maybelle, but I’m not. Not yours, anyway.” He gives me a tight smile, and just for a second, I see the man beneath the scars. His voice is softer than before. I open my mouth to reply, but I don’t know what to say. He continues. “After we convince your father, I’ll need help bridging the gap between the rich and poor. You can stay on as a Marauder, or I can help you get a better job in the city.” He smirks, and my heart flutters against my chest.

“You’re giving me an option?” I whisper, studying the metal railing and the flecked mirrors lining the walls in the hallway behind us.

“I’m not going to hold you captive if that’s what you’re asking.”

I flick my eyes up to his. “I just figured. . . because of last night. . .” I shift away from him so that I can walk past him and down the hallway to my mysterious surprise, but Samson gently tugs me closer.

“I’m—I’m trying to find people who view the future the same way I do. I want to live in a world where everyone has access to art and education—books, museums, dance, music, universities, parks—a world where there aren’t people who seek to destroy art and everything it stands for. I have to do something. I have to protect it—without art, we’ll be more of a soulless society than we already are. I need your help, Maybelle.” I hesitate, sucking in a sharp breath, and he continues. “I’ll admit my methods last night were extreme, but if you want nothing to do with me, I’d understand completely. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I bite my lower lip and look down. “I want to help. I really do. I just don’t know if I can trust you.” When I’m done speaking, I look back up at him. His eyes connect with mine, and my face burns. He’s waiting for an answer.

“How can I persuade you to help me?” he asks, his voice liquid velvet. I’m drawn to his markings. I want to trace them—the ones on his lips—“Maybelle?”

Snapping out of my daze, I clear my throat and shake my head. “How about I give you an answer by the end of the week? That way, I can figure out a plan to convince my father, and you can prove that you are the man you say you are.”

He grins. “Fair enough.” He moves and backs up, smiling at me until he turns and pushes two double doors open with a steady *whoosh*. I follow him into the biggest room I’ve ever seen. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I gasp, clutching my heart.

Not a room.

A library.

A gleeful giggle escapes my throat, and I jump forward, sprinting to the nearest shelf. First editions, second editions, special anniversary editions. . . hardbacks, paperbacks. . . I’ve never seen a real book. Never in all of my years as a book thief. Godric saw one once, but he failed in obtaining it. I finger the leather spines, the metallic writing, trying to make out which titles are here. I pull one of them out, unsure of the language used, and the thrill of opening a real book sends shivers down my spine. It creaks slightly, like a rusty door, and the pages, my *god* the pages. . . I hold the book up and inhale.

Heaven.

“Every time we conducted a raid, I brought the books back to this room. Most of the people I borrowed from were not like you, Maybelle. They did not—could not—appreciate it.” He looks around, and I follow his gaze.

“This place is the product of years of organization and filing, learning languages, buying buildings in the city to house the books if we can convince your father. Ideally, I want him to announce a royal decree that would grant amnesty to those still in possession of any art. Everyone should have books, paintings, music. . . it shouldn’t be illegal anymore,” Samson murmurs, coming closer to me. I can smell him—a mix of tobacco and vanilla.

My eyes flick between him and the rows of bookshelves. Which temptation shall I indulge first? “I agree.”

“All over the city, art flourished regardless. You’re a testament to that. Even in dark times, people found it. And hopefully soon, all of it will be freely available to *everyone*.”

“And if I decide not to help you?” I whisper, letting my eyes wander across his jagged scars. A flicker of pain washes over his face, and he brings his hand up to my cheek. The roughness sends a shiver down my spine, and I close my eyes. “Will you kill me? To prove a point?” I don’t have the courage to open my eyes, to see the truth lolling in his blue irises.

“I don’t think I could now,” he says finally, and I clamp my eyes tight as his finger grazes my jaw and then my collarbone. When he pulls away, I feel the absence of him and I open my eyes.

“How did you get those scars?” I inquire, standing up straight.

At this, he takes another a step back and looks down at his filthy shoes. “Do you really want to know?” I nod, and he rolls the sleeves of his robes up his arms. I gasp, my eyes tracing the thick lesions roping around his forearms, his fingers. . . He unties his cloak and lets it fall to the ground, leaving him shirtless. I study the scars that wrap around his biceps, his chest, neck, and face. . .

“Who did that to you?” I ask, taking a step toward him.

“The night I was crowned the King of Marauders, I awoke in the middle of the night to a raging fire, trapped inside my bed chambers. By then, the Marauders were established, and though I’ll never know what really happened that night, I believe someone in the group betrayed me to one of the Elite. The intent was to kill me, to burn me alive. But I fought to stay alive. As the flames licked me, I fought for my life, and for people like you—the oppressed and poor. I fought through the flames, bore the pain, screaming until I could be rescued. The fire was so hot. At one point, I could feel the skin on my face melting. But I held strong, backed into a far corner, screaming until one of my friends dashed through the flames with a blanket, covering me completely. I don’t remember anything after that. The friend who saved me died in doing so. She saved my life.”

I didn’t realize I was crying until one of my tears fell upon my crossed arms. I wipe the wetness away and shake my head in disbelief.

“I hated your kind for so long,” I start, my voice thick with tears. “I was raised to hate you, to blame you for every awful thing. Doesn’t it bother you

that everyone thinks you're a monster?"

Samson watches me with a small smile and shoves his hands in his pants pockets, slumping his shoulders. "I fought so hard for my life in that fire, Maybelle. My life wouldn't be mine if I cared about what everyone thought. Plus, people usually don't stick around once they get a good glimpse of me. In the past two years, since I've been crowned, I've learned not to tie my confidence up with acceptance. Besides, character and reputation are two different things. I know who I am, and I know I'm not the man that everyone despises, and that's the only thing pushing me forward to do what I intend to do. Sometimes, it's the only thing worth waking up for."

Such resilience. I'd never met someone with that much internal strength. I wondered what kinds of demons ate away at him at night, in the dark, all alone. . . what he told himself to help the people who would rather slit his throat than hear what he had to say. People like me.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, my voice quiet in the expansive room.

He chuckles. "No. Not anymore." Grabbing his cloak from the ground, he wraps it around himself and walks past me. I whip around. "Enjoy your week, Maybelle. I have business to attend to for the next five days, so please make yourself at home. Luciano or Horace will escort you to your meals. Thrasher will enjoy your company," he adds, gesturing to the dog now standing next to me expectantly, wagging his tail. *Thrasher?* Yeah, right. I watch Samson slip into the hallway with graceful agility. Just before the twin doors close, he winks.

I'm glad he's not around to see my answering blush.

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I SPEND THE next few days devouring all of the books I can get my hands on. Late morning until dinner, when I'm not formulating a plan to convince my father of Samson's cause or worrying about Godric (who Luciano *swears on his life* is okay), I meander the never-ending aisles of the Marauder library, selecting no less than ten books to skim through in the daylight. After dinner, with Luciano's permission, I haul double that amount to my room and spend the rest of my waking hours with my nose in a book. And not just any book—I found an aisle titled, "Classics," and I've never read so many fabulous stories in my life.

And not just books, but all kinds of art.

For example, Horace gives me a tour of the adjoining warehouse buildings, otherwise known as The Art Stores. Paintings, drawings, sculptures. . . all of it cared for, all of it ready to move in the dead of night, once we have permission. There is an entire building dedicated to music and movie storage. Our side doesn't have screens, so Samson drew up plans himself for theaters to be built every few blocks. As for the music, we'll be able to rent little devices that allow us to listen to music from the libraries he hopes to place in every section of the city—both on our side and the Elite side. As Luciano shows me the blueprints for the central library, I realize Samson has spent years thinking this through, and plans are being set in motion to change the lives of those on our side of the wall forever. He's waiting to unleash the surprise of a lifetime on people who've never dared to dream of such things. Universities and schools will open, subjects like mathematics, science, history, and economics will be taught.

But all of it depends on my ability to convince my father that art is important enough to die for. Because if he disagrees, Samson and I might very well meet our untimely deaths.

The evening of Samson's return, I step into my bedroom after a long bath to find a dress and a piece of parchment from him. Smiling, I finger the silky, gold material and laugh at his note.

I know, I know, a dress. But hear me out, will you? One, you don't have to wear it. You could wear a sack for all I care, but I will be wearing a suit and I didn't want you to feel underdressed. Two, meet me in the bar across

the street at six. I hope you like to dance.

-S

The dress is simple yet elegant, the material so fine that it slips through my trembling fingers. I've never worn something this nice. It must've cost a fortune. It's floor-length, fitted through the hips, with thin, barely-there straps and a cowl neck. As I step into the dress, I worry that the thin material will cling to me in an unflattering way, but it has the opposite effect, hugging my hips and chest loosely and cinching at the waist, while the bottom tulips out. I throw my hair up into a loose french twist, wishing more than ever that I was actually adept in the art of hair and makeup. I turn to Thrasher, who has taken up residence on my bed for the last week, and he just huffs and looks away. *Okay, then. Thanks for the vote of confidence.* Just as I swipe on some mascara and clear lip gloss, there's a faint knock at my bedroom door. Teetering in the gold heels Samson sent with the dress, I throw the door open and immediately burst into tears as Godric collides with me.

"How—what—w-where did you come from?" I stutter, pulling away as he grins. Behind him, Horace winks at me before walking away.

"He's cute," Godric mumbles, nudging his head in Horace's direction and closing the door behind him as he steps into my room. "I've been worried sick all week, and I now realize I needn't have worried," he teases, his eyes flicking across the room. He arches a brow and places a hand on his hips. "That dress is exquisite, but your hair and makeup don't do it justice. Sit down. I'll fix it," he directs, pointing to the bench in front of the vanity.

I smile and take a seat, wiping the tears off of my cheeks. "I missed you," I whisper, grabbing his hand and kissing it. "They told me you were fine, but you never know with Marauders," I start, hiccupping as I try to calm my emotions.

"Princess, I spent eighteen years taking care of myself before you came along. I was fine. I'm just glad Horace came to collect me when he did. Your father's been questioning me every day." I stiffen, sniffing into a tissue, but he continues, running his hands through my hair. I close my eyes and groan as he gives me a scalp massage. "Don't worry, I hid everything that was suspect. It's annoying, but not dangerous. I know better than that."

I mumble something unintelligible as he chuckles, playing with my hair as my eyelids grow heavier. Soon, the comb is replaced with mild tugging

and the feel of pins at the base of my neck. We chat and catch up while I try not to doze off. When I pry my eyes open after a few minutes, he's managed to take my simple french twist and turn it into a messy, sensual pile off of my right shoulder. Pieces fall elegantly around my face. I turn and smile.

"What about my face?" I inquire, pouting my lips.

Godric smiles—his white teeth stand out against his ebony skin—and his dark, almond eyes crinkle up in the corners. "You don't need much, but how about we switch out the lip gloss for red lipstick?"

A few minutes later, he's subtly dusted my face chest with some glittery powder, and to his delight, he finds a gold, filigreed headband to stick in my hair. The effect with the matching shoes is incredible. Godric is a hair and makeup wizard.

"Thank you," I mutter, standing and giving him a tight hug. "Are you joining us for dinner and drinks across the street?"

He pulls away and places his hands on my bare arms, rubbing them and smiling contentedly. "Not tonight. I thought I'd hang around the warehouse and see what kinds of loot these guys have collected over the years." He smirks. "Horace offered to give me a tour," he adds, winking.

I laugh. "Well, in that case, I suppose I'll see you tomorrow."

We say our goodbyes, and at five to six, I join arms with Luciano as he escorts me out of the warehouse and into the dark, old bar across the street. He opens and closes his mouth before shaking his head and walking away, leaving me to take in the empty bar alone. I laugh. A week ago, you could not have paid me to befriend a marauder. Now, I had several. A bartender polishes glasses across the divide, paying me no attention, and a jukebox in the corner plays a tune I've never heard. Music isn't popular anymore—not on our side. I saunter over and peruse the options, unfamiliar with most of it. Pushing a few buttons, I wait for my random selection to play. I only chose it because the man on the cover reminded me of Samson.

"Excellent choice, princess," the King of Marauders drawls, his deep, rich voice sending shivers down my spine. I turn and face him, and his mouth opens as he appraises the dress. Then, the shoes. And back up to my face. His eyes gleam with the sort of thrill that makes my knees tremble. I blush. "The dress looks every bit as lovely as I'd hoped," he adds, his eyes skimming me over once again before taking a step forward.

“You—you look nice, too,” I mumble, clearing my throat and regarding his tailored suit. It’s navy blue, fitted in all the right places, and it makes him look so polished and *different*. He’s carrying his jacket over his left shoulder, and he forewent a tie, opting instead to unbutton the top buttons and roll up the crisp, white sleeves.

The music begins to play—an upbeat tune in a style I’ve never heard, but it brings a smile to my face nonetheless. Samson drapes his jacket across one of the barstools and holds his hand out for me. Swallowing, I reach for him and he tugs me into him gently. When our bodies meet, he pauses and looks down at me. Neither of us speaks, but I know he feels it. I’m too close to him to not notice his reaction. Tilting my head up, his breath halts right along with mine. Without thinking, I reach up and caress his scarred cheek with the palm of my hand, mesmerized by how soft it feels.

“Maybelle,” he starts, his voice raspy. “I don’t think—”

“Let’s dance,” I interrupt, not wanting to hear what I’m sure is some sort of rejection. As he nods and begins to sway to the music, pulling and twirling me until I’m howling with laughter, I can’t help but feel a twinge of regret. Why would he ever want to be with someone like me? I am the enemy, and he’s using me for his cause. He said so. He’s only endeared to me because I know more about him than he knows about me. To him, I’m just a rebellious princess who steals books for fun. A princess he has to woo in order to get his way. A princess he can stick in a dress in the hopes of persuading her to help with his mission.

Pulling away suddenly, my smile fades as I watch the confusion distort his face.

Hurt.

I feel hurt.

And played.

Scowling, I look around. The dark bar, the jazzy music, the nice clothes, Godric’s visit. . . it was all to butter me up. Until now, that didn’t necessarily bother me. Until his breath met my ears, until his warm hands enveloped mine, until his warm arm snaked around my waist and tugged me close, I didn’t care if I was being used. But now? The bitterness seeps up my throat, and I want to hurt him before he has a chance to annihilate my every emotion.

“This was a mistake,” I say slowly, feeling the tears well up in my eyes. I can still feel the heat of rejection on my cheeks despite the minute we spent dancing jovially.

He frowns, the crease in his forehead deep as he rubs his lips with his hands. “Maybelle—”

“All of this? It didn’t work. My father will never side with you because I’ll never side with you.”

“Maybelle—” his voice pleads, and he takes a step forward. I retreat to the back, to where I know there’s a door that leads to the abandoned streets. His eyes flick behind me, and his face goes rigid as he realizes what I’m about to do. “Don’t, please.”

A single tear falls down my face as I walk backward and shake my head. “A Marauder could never love an Elite.” He shakes his head and reaches out for me, but I hold a hand out. “I was born an Elite. I am the daughter of Elias Montcroix. Even if you could look past that, your people would never forgive you.” He opens his mouth to speak, but I interrupt once more, feeling the rage singe through my limbs. “You believe our world is capable of the kind of utopia you strive for? Think again. Once my father knows who took me, you and all of your people will be dead. I’ll make sure to burn the books myself,” I add, watching as his face pales. “Perhaps the world is a better place without the hope of fairytales.”

It is then that I realize, he may look the part of a Beast, but I am the true savage.

Growing up, I always thought the Marauders were the bad guys. Stealing for the sake of stealing, adding to their opportunistic collections. There was no rhyme or reason for their crimes—or so I thought. But now, I know Samson was behind every one of those heists. He had a purpose, a cause, a *reason* for everything he did. And everything he did, he did for the betterment of his people. To one day get to this point, to throw up libraries and museums without any recognition. To bring the art to everyone, regardless of who they were. Whereas I, Maybelle Montcroix, stole only for my pleasure, hoarding the books behind a secret wall in my apartment for no one but me, and occasionally Godric, to enjoy. I was the selfish one. I was the criminal. I was the villain in this story.

I turn quickly and push the back door open. Samson’s shouts behind me get louder, and I know he’s chasing me, but I have to get away from him. I tear down an abandoned alley, kicking my heels off and gathering my dress

so I can climb the fence and jump down the other side. Just as I hoist myself up, a warm hand wraps around my ankle.

“Don’t do this,” Samson begs, gripping my skin tightly. I move to kick him away, but he’s stronger and holds my foot still. “I don’t understand what happened back there,” he says quickly, running his other hand through his hair. “Talk to me.”

I hesitate, just for a second, and he uses the moment to drag me down and into his arms. I fight, pounding my fists against his chest and wiggling away from him as much as I can in his powerful hold. He pushes me against the fence, and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist. Breathing heavily, I stop fighting. I knew I would the second I fell against him.

“You didn’t mean what you said,” he murmurs, leaning in close to my neck. I close my eyes and feel my whole body go limp. “My people would forgive me. The Marauders will do whatever I tell them to. That is the beauty of being King. And I *know* our world is capable of the beauty you so vehemently deny,” he continues, pressing himself into me. I bite my tongue to keep from moaning. “I know because of you. Because you fought to save the beauty and the art in your own way. If you still don’t want to help me, I’ll understand. However, I know how much you love those fairytales. Don’t give up. Not on me. Not on us. Not yet. Real life mimics art.”

He closes the distance with intention, and I swallow nervously as he presses firmly against me and reaches down to slide my dress up to my knees. I watch as the palms of his scarred hands move slowly up my bare thighs. When I look into his eyes, I feel my resolve shatter. He’s watching me with such fervent need—a need I didn’t know I was capable of producing in another human being. Wrapping his hand around my waist, he pulls me impossibly closer, his face inches from mine. My eyelids flutter and then close completely just as his lips feather mine.

“I’ve wanted to do this since I caught you in that Elite house,” he whispers. I taste his breath on me, and that mixed with the heat of his body sends a shudder down my spine. I lean forward and kiss him. The kiss is soft at first, innocent, but all of that is soon stripped away the second he runs his hands through my messy hair and slides his tongue against my lips. I’m only marginally concerned about the red lipstick.

Feeling light and dizzy, heavy and rooted all at once, I move my hand to his neck, deepening the kiss as his body pushes against mine again. I moan into his mouth, and I feel him smile. There’s no way to describe how he’s

making me feel, except that I want more of it and I never want it to stop. He kisses me with conviction, with apology, with acceptance, all wrapped up in the perfect duo of tenderness and roughness. I pull away.

Gasping for air, he sets me down softly and pulls me close. I rest my head against his racing, wild heartbeat.

“I’ll help you,” I concede, wrapping my arms around him and inhaling the scent of tobacco and vanilla. “Let’s go see my father.”

Epilogue

ONCE THERE WAS, one day there will be: this is the beginning of every fairy tale. Except this is the beginning no longer. There is no *if* and no *perhaps*, so we shall conclude with the unconditional truth by saying this. Far away and into the future, in a land rebuilt and healing, through clear skies and the promise of beauty, utopia, and hope, lived two Marauders who saved the art for all humankind. . .

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sounds of silence

Hayley Stumbo

A TALE ABOUT a man who wants nothing more than to die, and how he
saves the life of someone who is dying to live.

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Prologue

I REALLY BELIEVE that the loudest parts of sound, are the ones we can't hear. They're the parts of sound that stick with us long after the noise is gone. Those easy feelings that pass through you after a song ends, and you find that it means more to you than it should. The way a howl in the night can linger so long that you're glancing over your shoulders for days. It's not just your ears that perk up when something radiates through you so passionately or deeply, but all your senses react at once. It's a heavy feeling, one you shouldn't take for granted.

But back to sound; it is such a loud thing, even when you can't hear it.

Did you know that the world bends when something crashes? It does, I assure you, and the result is more than explosive bursts of screeching tires, metal being crushed beneath glass, and screams. Screams are hard to ignore, even ones you don't hear, but rather feel.

It doesn't take the ability to hear or feel a scream of terror ripple through your bones and come to rest on your skin. There are some senses we never lose, and one is the sense of danger, or fear. It's that feeling that creeps upon you when you're least expecting it, like now, when all I'm trying to do is enjoy a lukewarm cup of coffee as I walk home. I wanted nothing major to ruin my night, I just want to get home, thumb my way through a good book, and sleep off another miserable day of life.

But my senses have another plan, and I catch a glimpse of a woman crossing the street in front of me, her face contorted into some wave of grief, as a car barreling through the intersection with the teenagers packed inside of it doesn't stop or slow as it approaches her. I swear I feel the ground shake beneath me as the car spins and water sprays from the pavement. The woman freezes and several onlookers cover their eyes and open their mouths. Goosebumps raise on my arms underneath my spring jacket and I know without a second thought, that those ripples of emotion are forming from impending screams.

The woman's eyes collide with mine, terror, anger, confusion, all three emotions mar the outline of her eyes but there's something else there, too, familiarity, maybe? Without thinking I dive toward the moving vehicle, my

coffee splattering my jacket along the way, and I don't know if there is more screaming or honking, or if there is anyone yelling for my attention, but I shove the woman away, trip over my feet and land quietly against the pavement, the lights of the car blinding me before something cold snatches me and I pass out.

If this is death, I'm ready.

I'll take it. Lukewarm, like my coffee, and garnished with just a dash of fear.

It's not death that snatched me that night in the street, but something more sinister with a wicked sense of humor. Life. And I'm still living it just like I was before I decided to collide with a car full of kids who just wanted to "have a good time."

I'm confined to a hospital bed in a private room where the view is less than pleasant. I've got a lovely glimpse of the building next to me, and the renovations taking place there. There's no shot of the sky or the spanning lake beyond the city. I'm bored, restless even, and I'm sick of being bothered by visitors who want to talk to the man who pushed the woman out of the way of danger, where Elm Street crosses Pine. I could see the headlines of the stories already and I roll my eyes.

They call me a hero.

Several reporters have peeked their heads into my room to jot down notes on their scratch pads or take pictures with me for their columns and blogs that I could care less about. I smile in none of the photos and shake my head continuously at the nurse who offers to translate my thoughts for me.

No, thank you. I motion to her, but she urges me to talk. I ignore her push to answer the same questions as the reporter before the one cramping my style now, and glance back to my window and my mediocre view. She leaves me to my silent rage and I'm sure she will complain to the other nurses about my demeanor, and then one of them will remind her of my condition, and she'll feel bad about the life I've lived, and the years ahead.

I lost the ability to hear when I was ten years old. I'd have much rather been born deaf, because being stripped of the beauty of music, or the call of a bird is devastating, especially to someone who spent all their time

mastering the art of the piano or hiding in the woods beyond their father's estate and just taking nature in.

The doctors informed my parents I had a rare form of a neurological disorder that would eventually strip me of my major senses. Hearing loss went first, and it wasn't a slow disease where sound slowly dripped off the edges of the Earth, no, I simply woke one morning and couldn't hear a thing. I couldn't hear my mother's cries or screams as she shook my shoulders along with her head. I could feel them though, rippling through me like the aftermath of a tsunami. Her shakes were coated in shame and worry, and it doesn't take being able to hear to know how loud disappointment can be. Once the hearing was gone, my ability to speak, went too. One day there was just no sound coming out of my mouth when I opened it, at least according to my mother that was the case, I couldn't tell either way.

Several years later, once I had mastered the art of sign language, I lost the ability to smell, and not three months after that, taste was wiped entirely. The doctors couldn't slow the disease, and instead tried to keep me happy while I waited for sight and touch to be removed from my life next.

That was ten years ago, and every day I wait.

I wait for the sun to never come up because I wake up blinded.

I wait to roll over and reach for a blanket, only to find my hand already gripping one. When touch goes, that's when all of me goes. I'll be nothing more than an empty vessel living an eternal life of silence because even if I were surrounded by people, I wouldn't know the difference.

My moment of despair is interrupted by a nurse sticking her head in with a smile. *You have a visitor* her lips say and I imagine my mom has come back for the thirteenth time to dote over me and thank God, I'm alive, even though she still wears shame in her eyes every time she sees me. I press my head into the pillow and roll my eyes before waving her in. The door opens slightly and I'm met by the same fierce gaze I saw the night on the street. The gaze of the woman I pushed out of the way.

I sit up a little straighter and rake a hand through my hair. It's difficult to meet a stranger when you are unkempt, for anyone, even an empty pile of nothing like me. I adjust the cheap hospital gown and do my best to seem awake, even though the morphine has other plans for me.

The woman shuts the door and offers me a glimpse at her face. I notice a few scrapes, likely from the pavement when I saved her from a fate I'd

gladly welcome, but other than that, she looks fine. Her cheeks are flushed and I can't decide if that's from being in a hospital room with the stranger who saved her, or because she stained them with rouge. She stares at me for a moment, and then sits down in the chair next to the bed.

I glance at the closed door, wondering why the nurse didn't stay. My gaze focuses back on the stranger next to me, her eyes decorated with specks of honey that almost match the highlights in her hair. I take sight very seriously considering it will be taken from me someday. I look at everything like it's art, and maybe that's a bad thing. Maybe that will make me miss this world even more when I can no longer see it, but for now, it keeps me occupied.

She smiles softly at me and her lips move slowly. I follow their movements and make out her words.

Thank you.

The right thing to do would be to smile and nod, tell her it was no problem, but I do none of those things. Instead I stare at her, eyes wide, and shrug my shoulders. Her eyes narrow at me and her eyebrows furrow. She glances down at her hands for a moment before looking back at me, waiting for a response.

Inside I curse the nurse for not staying here and translating my words so she can understand them better. Now it's going to be a game of lip reading and writing down my thoughts. I stretch and reach for the paper on the table next to my bed, but something in my arm snaps and I think I let out a garbled sound. I wince and fall backwards onto the pillow. The stranger stands and presses her hands against my shoulders. She shakes her head at me and looks at the table, her eyes rest on my pad of paper and the pen laying on top and then make their way to my own.

I take a few deep breaths as the pain dissipates. I punch the morphine pump excessively and once I let it go I point to my mouth and then cover my ears, while shaking my head. It's a simple gesture but most people recognize it, and then I'm bathed in the pity and sorrow that crosses their face. I almost don't want to look at this woman's face. Maybe it's the fact that I'm exposed severely in this hospital. Embarrassment floods my cheeks and I'm sure they've turned red.

Eventually my eyes find hers and she sinks back to her chair and leans against the back of it. She says nothing, at least her lips don't move, and

shakes her head slowly. She raises her hands to her chest and begins moving them quickly.

Were you born deaf or did this happen later?

For a moment, I think the morphine has gotten the best of me. But when I don't answer right away, her hands begin moving again, quickly. She's skilled.

I was born deaf, so I never really knew anything different than this. I've never heard the sound of music, or the scream of a child in a restaurant. That's probably why I didn't move out of the way the other night, I didn't hear the car approaching like everyone around me probably did. Well, everyone except you. Lucky for me, you saw it. Or I wouldn't be here.

Her fingers stop and she rests her hands on her lap. I don't know where to start, so I raise my hands lazily and begin to move them.

You moved your lips when you first came in. You thanked me. Why not just go right into signing?

She smiled and began her rapid movements again.

I wanted to see how you reacted. The nurses said you were a real bear. For someone who saves the lives of strangers, I didn't believe them.

I think she expects me to smile, but instead I just move my hands and stare into her eyes. That's one thing I haven't lost. Eye contact. Deep, intimidating eye contact.

They're right.

She doesn't raise her hands right away. Instead she pulls some lip balm from her purse and spreads it across her lips slowly. The morphine starts to coarse through my veins and I feel my eyelids droop. I blink a few times and move my hands again.

I'm not sure what you want me to say. You're welcome.

She lets out a deep breath and the way her chest rises and falls makes me think she's irritated. Good. I don't need friends, especially a deaf girl who is grateful to be alive.

You can't be a bear if you jump in front of speeding cars to save the life of a stranger. You are lucky to be alive.

If I could laugh, I would. I swirl my hands quickly.

Luck's got nothing to do with it.

She narrows her eyes again and tucks her shoulder-length hair behind her ears.

You don't seem grateful to be alive. You don't even seem grateful that I'm alive. I walked away with a few cuts and bruises.

The morphine tugs at my eyelids again.

I'm not.

My movements have become slow and I seem to have offended the stranger. She pierces her lips together and rises quickly.

Which part aren't you grateful for, exactly?

I shrug my shoulders and cushion myself farther into my hospital bed. She leaves the room in a hurry and doesn't bother looking back at me. That's how you know you've really pissed someone off, they don't even give you a parting glance.

She disappears from my room and leaves me to my drug-induced sleep, for which I'm grateful. I silently chuckle at the realization that I didn't even get her name, and she never even asked for mine, although I'm sure the nurses and doctors told her all about the man who "saved her." I roll my head to the side as my thoughts become blurred and sleep pulls at me with her quick fingers.

Maybe I'm grateful that I saved her life and perhaps I should have been more clear about that, but I'm not grateful for surviving. I didn't push her out of the way to save her life. I pushed her out of the way so that I could end mine. Yet here I am living, and trying my best to avoid life's wicked smile.

I am released from the hospital a week later.

I have an air cast on my right arm and my whole body aches, but other than some minor contusions and the fact that I now walk with a slight limp, I would say I'm doing pretty well. My mom brought me to my apartment and before she left she made sure I was all set with food, drinks, medications, and promised that she would check in daily. There was an ache to her hug when she left, and it left me with a fleeting feeling of panic. It was almost like she knew I had jumped in front of that car for one reason alone, but she never said anything about it.

After she leaves, I rip off my air cast, and sleep for twelve hours straight.

The next morning I decide to go out for coffee. My favorite shop on Grimes Street opens early, even on Sundays, and I leave before the sun comes up. Even though I can't taste their coffee, or their blueberry muffins with the crumb topping, the shop is dark and tucked away from the rest of the city. I can disappear in there for hours and no one bothers me, at least until the lunch rush. My leg aches with every step I make, but I push through it and try to regain normalcy to my life.

I duck into the shop and notice that I'm one of three people there, and a wave of peace spreads through me. I smile at Tanya, the dark-haired woman who has taken my order for years and nod when she asks me if I want the regular. I lay my cash on the counter and walk to my usual booth in the back. I sink in and wince at the momentary discomfort in my leg, but it fades just as quickly as it came on. Tanya brings my drink and slides me a piece of paper with her scribbled handwriting on it.

I'm glad you are okay. We were worried about you, but how wonderful of you to save Veyda.

I furrow my brow and glance up at her, I mouth her name to Tanya and she smiles before mouthing her response back to me.

She's a regular.

Of course, she is. I nod once and feel my expression fall. Tanya seems to notice and pats me on the shoulder before she walks away and leaves me to my steaming black coffee and muffin. I pick at the crumb top with quick fingers and sip on my drink.

Sometime after coffee number two, and when I am knee deep in *Brave New World*, someone sits down across from me at my booth. I glance upwards expecting to see Tanya passing a few minutes of time on her break, but instead, I'm met with those honey eyes and red lips. Veyda. Somehow her name fits her. Rigid and silent, yet somehow regal.

I close my book and lay it on the table.

You found me then, Veyda.

She smiles and raises her hands.

You're easy to spot, even when you think you are hiding.

I mull over her words and she notices the shift in my demeanor.

Relax. Tanya told me you were over here. It's nice to officially meet you, Harrison. Since we didn't exchange introductions in the hospital, maybe now would be the right time to.

For a moment, I wish I could hear, and that's a desire that doesn't fall upon me too often. I imagine her speaking my name in a soft, velvety voice and I swear I can feel goosebumps form on my skin. I shrug off the feeling and move my hands.

It's nice to officially meet you, Veyda.

She shakes her head.

Liar. You wish I would go away.

Maybe yes, maybe no.

Well, then you shouldn't have saved me.

I cross my arms and lean against the back of the booth. She keeps her eyes on me, and I notice the intensity burning inside them. Maybe all of us who lack the ability to hear are proud owners of that intensity. Sigh, the thing I value most in this world anymore, is all I have, and maybe I'm not the only one who feels that way.

I lean forward and move my fingers rapidly.

I should have been more clear in the hospital, and I apologize for how I acted. I am not ungrateful for saving you, Veyda. I'm glad you lived.

She keeps her eyes on me as she speaks to me in the only language we know.

But you're ungrateful to be alive?

It's complicated.

She smiles slightly before starting in again.

I've always found the complicated parts of life to be my favorite. If everything was easy, then I think I'd be bored most of the time.

You have no idea what level of complicated I'm referring to.

Well, you can tell me if you'd like.

No.

Why? She frowns and I hate that I notice the way her freckles are splattered across her cheeks and her lips pout when she isn't smiling. I shake my head quickly.

I don't even know you.

Well, I don't know you either yet that didn't stop you from jumping in front of a car to save my life.

I see her point but I don't want her to know that.

Can we just talk about something else?

Well, we can but I'm just going to go back to this conversation when we finish our next one.

Curiosity killed the cat. I smirk.

True, but I'm sure if I was in danger of dying again, you'd find another way to save me. So, I'll take my chances on curiosity.

You don't know when to stop, do you?

I can go at this all day.

My lips twitch and I crack my knuckles.

I don't feel like giving you a rundown of my state of mind right now.

Maybe later you'll change your mind. I can't help it that I'm slightly intrigued by a man who was so eager to save my life, but doesn't seem to value or want to live his own.

I lean against the booth and notice an older woman smiling at us from her table. She's probably finding our outing to be something magical, something she will go home and tell her family about. "I saw two young people signing to each other today in town, and it was just the most amazing thing to witness. How wonderful that they can still hold conversations, such deep and meaningful conversations with each other!" If only she knew what we were really saying to each other, and that this conversation was anything but special.

I roll my eyes at my silent judgement and Veyda must notice the shift in my demeanor because she sits up a little straighter and adjusts her bracelet before starting in on me again.

What's wrong? You seem like you don't want to be here.

There's no fooling you, is there?

She shrugs her shoulders on a smile, and I wring my hands before answering.

I don't like people.

You don't like people or you don't like people staring at you when you're trying to have a conversation?

Both.

She smiles and shakes her head before adjusting herself in her seat. She looks serious now, important even. She leans forward over the table and moves her hands slowly, softly even.

In all seriousness, if you want me to go, just tell me to. I can leave you alone, but all I'm trying to do is thank you properly for giving me the gift of life. I've got a lot of living left to do, it'd be a real shame if I had died that night.

I stare at her and blink a few times, only to notice the woman across from us is joined by another, who also finds our little silent conversation to be much more interesting than anything they could have to talk about. As much as I find her pressing urgency to know about my ungrateful taste for life annoying, it's the first time in a long time that I've felt somewhat normal. Two people communicating over coffee is something that doesn't happen in my world. I push the hope building in my chest to the side and try to look unimpressed.

Can we just go somewhere else?

Veyda nods and rises slowly, and I stare at her for a moment before I mimic her actions and do the same. She's animated and excited about the littlest of things, like pushing her hair behind her ear or glancing at her watch before waving goodbye to Tanya. For someone who can't hear or speak, she's awfully loud.

And then I notice my reflection in the window. I'm still too pale for an early spring breeze, and I look like I haven't been properly groomed in weeks. My hair is pushed to the side, for the first time in my life I have a slight beard, and I'm wearing a sweatshirt and worn jeans. If Veyda is loud and confident, I am her opposite. I follow her out of the coffee shop and keep my eyes fixated on her. She's so eager to taste life, and all I want to do is remember what coffee tasted like. I scowl to myself and bathe in envy of everyone around me, including the silent woman who doesn't seem to be bothered by an absence of sound. I grind my teeth together and step into the warm air.

Outside on the street she smiles and inhales deeply, arms outstretched, she looks like someone who has just felt the sun for the very first time.

Don't you just love the smell of spring? Her fingers dance in between words quickly. She picks at a cherry blossom tree and smiles wider, if that is all possible. I feel my jaw twitch and I shake my head no, before walking around her in the direction of the park. All of this suddenly seems like a mistake. In the coffee shop I was secluded in my corner, but out here, out in the world, it's harder to hide what I am, what keeps me from ever going outside. She'll notice because that's what people like her do, they notice everything and pocket their thoughts for later.

She catches up to me in seconds and I notice her hands move eagerly.

No? What do you mean, no? How can you not love the smells of spring?

We turn into the small park, enclosed with a wrought iron fence and a row of trees that have not all traded their branches for leaves yet. I find a bench near the fence, sit down and rub my leg. It's killing me but I don't want her to know that. Veyda looks at me oddly, but doesn't sit down next to me. She seems completely content to be standing in the middle of the park, shifting her weight between her feet and basking in the sunshine. Her eyes don't leave mine though, and they're full of questions.

What? I finally ask her.

Why are you so full of hate, Harrison?

I feel my eyes begin to roll and I rest my leg on the bench. She watches me with a fierce gaze that screams, "you should still be resting."

I'm not full of hate. I lie. I just can't smell anything.

Her eyebrows furrow again, something I've noticed a few times now, and the look of concern that spreads wildly over her face is still somewhat soft.

You can't smell?

Nope. And for the record, I can't taste either. Eventually, I won't be able to see either. And the doctors tell me I'll lose the ability to feel as well.

Veyda begins pushing her shoe into the dirt slowly and turning it from side to side, a nervous tick that half the population succumbs to without ever noticing it. She walks to the side of the bench and sits in the grass while keeping her eyes on the horizon, or the fountain in the center of the park. Anywhere but on me. Her hands still move though.

Is this something that progressively has gotten worse?

She turns to me after she asks the question, knowing that she won't see my response if she doesn't.

Yes. I lost hearing first. Everything else came later.

Were there any warning signs?

No. One day I just woke up and everything was quiet.

She looks toward the fountain again and inhales deeply. I imagine she is still high on the scent of lilies and exhaust from the nearby cars. She waits for a moment before starting in again.

Is it a disease?

I nod to keep the conversation minimal. I've never had a stranger ask me so many questions before, and I've never answered them all so willingly. I like to think that I prefer my silence to the roar of a loud room filled with middle-aged hipsters boasting on their accomplishments. The

majority of the conversations I have are with my mother or a doctor, or all alone in my mind. I'm not used to cluttering up my days, with the sound of silent conversations.

Can they treat it? What's it called?

A name too long for me to even try to spell it, and no they can't. They just tell me I should be grateful for the senses I still have. I smirk and shake my head.

Veyda perks up at my last sentence and picks at a blade of grass before choosing her words.

So, you are ungrateful to be alive.

I don't respond to her, and instead run a hand through my hair and notice how greasy it feels. I frown and look down at my leg, wishing I had brought some pain medication with me. She notices my concern, and, why wouldn't she? In a matter of hours this woman already knows more about me than some of my family members, and in my honest opinion, we're still strangers. She stands up quickly and moves her fingers in a rapid pace.

I think you need to rest. It looks like you're in pain, and I'm no doctor but I assume you were told to take it easy for a while, and walking through the park is anything but taking it easy. Let's get you back to your house. Where do you live?

On Westfield Street, the condos near the lake.

She smiles at me and shows her perfect teeth. *That's a lovely area with a beautiful view.*

I wince as I stand and begin responding to her. *That's the point. I want to see as much of the world while I still can.*

There are no more thoughts that take the form of sign language from Veyda, at least until she hails a taxi cab and asks me for the address of my condo. She writes down something quick on a piece of paper and hands it to the driver, he smiles at her kindly, not an ounce of pity on his face, and I don't argue with her urgency to get me home. Although my condo is just a few blocks away, I am certain I couldn't make it there if I wanted to.

We say nothing else to each other until she has successfully helped me into the elevator of my complex and rode with me the sixteen floors up until we reach my condo. The doors open to my foyer and I punch in a code that grants me access to my condo. The door opens and I turn to face Veyda.

You didn't have to come this far, but thank you.

I feel myself stumble as I attempt to walk into my home. She notices, smiles, and grips my arm.

I just want to make sure you're okay before I leave. Can I get you something? Water, pain medication?

I want to tell her no, and that I'm fine, but my hesitation is enough of a response for her to walk past me and step into my condo on her own. She holds the door open for me as I limp my way inside. Once I'm inside my kitchen I go to the fridge and open the doors. She meets me there and shakes her head.

Please, go sit down, I'll bring you water and your medicine.

I nod and point to the island. *Just two of those pills and a glass of water will be all I need. The glasses are in the cupboard next to the sink.*

She smiles and I make my way to the couch and fall upon it quickly. My leg is throbbing and my entire body feels like a sack of potatoes that have been ransacked and shipped all over the continental United States. I close my eyes and grind my teeth so hard I swear they'll shatter. When I open my eyes, she is looking down at me, her eyes wide and her body rigid. She hands me the pills and the water.

You'll probably fall asleep from the medication, but is there anything else I can get you before I go?

I shake my head and swallow the pills. She stands there for a moment and waits for me to say something, but I'm not sure how to end our conversation with anything other than a thank you. So, that's what I give her, and she smiles softly and waves before she disappears from my sight.

Whether it's the exhaustion from so much movement in a short amount of time or the medication coursing through me, I find sleep quickly. My mind drifts in and out of consciousness as I think about the last two weeks of my life. Death still seems like a better option, but something about the way Veyda danced down the sidewalk today, sticks with me until sleep claims me.

I don't see or hear from Veyda for several days. I'm pretty sure I hallucinated the whole thing and that it was a side effect from too much pain medication. We never exchanged phone numbers, not that I'd ever think to. Text messaging and emails are the only way I can really

correspond with someone on a phone, and a cell phone isn't really the first thing a deaf person thinks about. But nevertheless, I have no way to get in touch with her, unless I see her out somewhere again.

My leg is finally feeling a little better, and I was scolded by the doctor for trying to do too much too soon, and that bedrest means bedrest. I promised him I would pay more attention to his rules, and as much as I hated to admit it, the taking it easy did seem to help with the healing. My mother stood by me with a nervous look on her face when the doctor asked me if I needed more pain medication and I told him yes. He didn't seem to think anything of it, but my mother's face led me to think she assumed I was addicted to them already. There was a fresh line of worry creasing into her forehead, and I definitely noticed.

The truth is, I lost the whole bottle of my pills and there were a few nights when I could have used one or two. It must have happened sometime during the night after Veyda left, because I woke up to a half-eaten plate of food and an empty can of soda. I had no recollection of eating or being in the kitchen at all, but my medicine was gone, and I assumed I had tossed it in the trash during my sandwich making festivities. Although I probably could have made it on ibuprofen, I didn't want to be somewhere and be in pain again, like the park, and not have relief.

My mother takes me to lunch where I pick around the edges of a chicken salad sandwich, and she scolds me with her eyes for not eating more. I tell her it'd be different if I could taste, and she finishes her soup with more dignity than I would have, and takes me home.

I decide to skim through *The Hobbit* in the afternoon, and once I'm settled on the couch and engulfed enough into the story, the light on the wall of my living room flashes three times, signaling a visitor. I assume it's my mother again, but there's a jolt of hope that bursts inside of me that makes me feel nervous. For a moment, I hope to find Veyda on the other side of the door, and that concerns me. I like my silence and I like my space. Visitors don't interest me and the buzz of company usually keeps me away from crowds, but for some reason, I can handle seeing her. Maybe because she's the first person I've ever gotten to have a conversation with, without the need of a translator.

When I open the door I'm almost struck with shock, because she is standing there, smiling at me excitedly, like she is happy to see me. I don't smile, or maybe I do, it's hard for me to tell because I can't remember the

last time I did smile. I take note of the way something blooms in my chest though. I'd like to call it happiness, but it dissipates as I walk behind her into the kitchen.

Just checking in to make sure you're still alive.

If I could laugh, I probably would. I feel my lips quiver and my cheeks burn.

I am.

Good. She digs in her purse and pulls out an orange prescription bottle full of pills and sets it on the counter. *I've had these since last time, I thought maybe I should give them back to you.*

Happy feeling gone. I take a step toward the bottle and examine it. They're my pain pills from when she was last here. My hands shake a little as I reach for them and I notice anger pooling in my stomach.

Why did you have these?

Her smile fades when she concentrates on my face. The intensity is back, I can feel it. Her hands move slower than I have seen them move, she's filled with a sense of caution.

Because I was worried you'd decide to try and kill yourself again.

And there it is, my plan to die is now known by more than just myself, and I'm the one to blame. Veyda is smart, smarter than a lot of people I meet, and it probably has something to do with the fact that she can't hear. People like us rely on sight, touch, even taste to experience the things that we can't hear. Well, people like her at least, with sight being the most important. For me, I try to see everything, because I know it'll all be gone soon.

I walk to my couch and sit down quickly, trying to avoid her eyes. She dances her way over to me and sinks to the floor in front of me.

Life, Harrison, her hands move slower than normal, life can be grand. Despite what you think, or what you feel, life can be full of good. Just because you've been robbed of a few things, please don't give up yet.

I watch her hands with anger. She has no idea what this is like, or what it's been like. No one does. The only thing she and I have in common is that she can't hear either. She doesn't know what it feels like to be a prisoner in your own body. To be caged by your ribs and skin. To be given an outlook that is not enticing, and to worry about when it will happen to you. I'm a time bomb that a madman forgot about, silently ticking away until it's time to just blow.

You have no idea what you're talking about.

Maybe not, but I'd understand it more if you told me. Have you ever told anyone how all of this makes you feel? Doctors don't count.

What does it matter? My hands become rapid, laced in anger. I imagine I'd be yelling if I could speak. I don't want to live in a constant state of worry or panic, and I have been for a long time. I'm just waiting for the bottom to drop out. Waiting to wake up and not be able to see the sun, or not be able to feel if something is warm or cold. I'm waiting for everything to be gone. Death looks pretty good from where I'm standing.

She shakes her head and looks at the ground. But what if, Harrison... what if it never gets any worse for you? What if you don't lose sight, and then you find that you're seventy years old and you've wasted all this time worrying about losing something, so much so that you forgot to see life. You forgot to experience it because you were waiting for darkness?

THEY TOLD ME IT WOULD PROGRESS.

She holds her hands up in defense and I notice I'm shaking. I'm not used to defending myself to anyone. I'm used to people avoiding me, to letting me be, but her, she's here in my living room, preaching to me about how I need to live life.

I'm not trying to upset you, I'm trying to get you to see...to really see things.

I see the world, Veyda. It's all I've got left.

She shakes her head. You see it, but you're not really looking at it. It's not just about having sight, Harrison. It's about feeling what that sight does to you. See places for their beauty, their incredible landscapes or architecture, not because you think you'll never see them again. You can't look at the world—at people—like that. You need to look at things to really see them. To feel them. To be a part of them.

What's the point, Veyda? Why bother seeing things for what they are, if eventually I'll be covered in darkness anyway?

The point...She pauses for a moment and glances out of my large floor-to-ceiling window, toward the lake in the distance. The point, Harrison, is that regardless of how life has been gifted to you, it's all you have. One chance is all you get at this. Do you really want to spend the next however many years waiting for something bad to happen? Think of all the things you could be seeing instead. You've lost sound, and scent, and taste, but you

still have sight. There's still things to be seen. Don't succumb to the darkness yet, not when there is still so much light.

I don't respond to her, instead I just keep my eyes on her, trying to understand where she came from and what gave her this outlook on life. People like us, the ones who were given a bad hand in life, we're the ones who usually keep to themselves, but here she is celebrating her life, and mine. And I'm not worth celebrating.

I've spent the entirety of my life waiting to lose another part of myself. I've spent so much time alone, I don't know what it's like to be with anyone.

There's still time to learn.

When she lays her hands in her lap she is smiling at me, that same smile she gave to me the day she thanked me for saving her life. The same smile she wore at my door not minutes ago. She was genuinely happy to see me, happy to have a moment to talk to me, even if our conversation were silent bouts of angst and realism.

You're the first person who has ever given me the time of day like this.

She shakes her head again and brings her hands to her chest.

That's not true. You attract attention wherever you go, but you've only ever seen what you wanted to. See that's the problem with waiting for the end to come, you miss all the in-between parts. And those are some of my favorites.

Something on my face cracks and I feel my lips quiver. She notices but continues on anyway.

I noticed you at the coffee shop for a long time, Harrison. But you always sat in the corner with your head down. You never looked at anyone or anything, except for when Tanya would bring you a new coffee. You'd perk up for a moment, you craved that interaction, but you always missed it because you were too focused on being different. Too focused on living a silent life in darkness and madness. The night you saved me, I recognized you. I knew exactly where I had seen you before, and for an instant it looked like you recognized me, too. You looked, and I mean really looked at me. If I hadn't survived, I think I would have died happy because you finally looked at something like it had purpose.

I wanted to die that night. I cut her off. I wanted to push you out of the way so that car would trample me. I wanted out of this world so badly, that I would resort to suicide.

But you still saved me. Regardless of what you wanted, you still were prepared to do some good and save me.

I thought back to that night and the way she looked right before I pushed her out of the way. I remembered how it felt knowing that even though I was about to die, she could possibly live. There was a fleeting moment where I did think that.

This world isn't all that bad, Harrison. You just have to be willing to actually see it for what it is, not just what you want to see.

I don't know where to start. I motion slowly and she reaches for me and grips her tiny hands around mine.

Let me show you.

Veyda makes it a point to spend the next several months showing me the world. I watch her like a hawk for the first few weeks of time we spend together. I mimic her actions and responses to things. She points out landmarks in the city that I've walked past a million times but never noticed before. She points out the clouds in the sky and their reflections in the puddles beneath my feet.

She never looks sad, even when we pass a quartet of musicians playing acoustic guitars in the park. Instead she sashays herself across the grass in front of them, and refuses to leave until I join her.

What if we're off beat?

You can feel it here if you pay attention. She responds quickly with her hands before placing one on my chest, right above my heart.

I spend all of my time looking, and really searching for new things to see, that I forget about the possibility of never being able to see again. Even if it would be stripped of me someday, at least I could see the world for now.

I invite her to dinner at my family's estate on the north end of the city. She smiles excitedly as we are driving up the tree-lined drive, and keeps her hands in mine the whole time. I smile back at her, something that I realize I've been doing a lot of lately. Something that I find easy to do now that she does it so much. She pointed it out to me one day, and I didn't even know that I remembered how to smile. I stood in front of the mirror that evening just staring at myself.

I collect my thoughts as we reach my parents' front door and exit the car. My mother, for the first time in years, doesn't boast that look of shame on her face when she sees me. Instead she's smiling, and opens her arms to Veyda who hugs her graciously and immediately begins signing with her. They both look happy. I notice the smiles, the animated hand gestures, and I watch my mother tilt her head back and open her mouth on a laugh.

My father shakes my hand and asks how I've been. He tells me I look different, taller, sharper, and a little more demure than I used to. I glance at Veyda who turns to meet my gaze just as mine locks on her, and I realize how much life she has given me, in such a short time. And to think, she could be missing from this world if I hadn't had the desire to die, and jump in front of a car for her.

It's the first time I think about life in a good way, and not view her as the angry, scorned woman who just wants to make my time here hell. For the first time in forever, I fear death immensely, because the thought of never seeing, feeling, or being with Veyda again, terrifies me. I think she feels the same way, because she doesn't let go of my hand all evening.

I spend the next five years seeing the world. Between trips to islands I can't figure out how to spell to the ruins of old castles in England, I feel like I've seen enough of the world to write a travel magazine filled with reviews and places to stay. Veyda lingered by my side through all of it, and I don't think I would have had it any other way.

I still haven't lost my site, and in fact, my sense of smell started to come back partially two years ago. I noticed I could smell something burning from upstairs one morning. It took me several minutes of convincing myself I was awake to acknowledge the fact that I could indeed smell. I ran through the hallway and down the stairs rapidly to find Veyda fanning a tray of bacon that she left in the oven too long.

She turned to me with a frown on her face and moved her hands rapidly.

I'm sorry, I turned away for one moment and it was just a moment too long. I can make something else for breakfast.

The corners of my mouth twisted upwards and I inhaled deeply. It was there, and it was faint, but I could smell the burnt meat and it might have been the loveliest thing I've ever smelled.

I smelled it burning upstairs.

I'll spray some air-fresheners and get the fan going, but—

Veyda paused mid-sentence and narrowed her eyes at me. *You smelled it?*

I nodded quickly, eagerly and she threw her towel down and ran to where I was standing. Holding my face with her hands, she stared into my eyes like she was looking for the sun. I grabbed her wrist with my own hand and pulled it to my nose, the faint smell of perfume danced across her skin. I was wrong. This was the loveliest thing I have ever smelled.

Veyda spent that morning crying and finding things for me to test my ability to smell on. Spices and perfume samples, she'd pull from magazines. She made an appointment with my doctor the next day, and I was sure this was all just a fluke, that I would wake up senseless again, but that never happened. Blood tests and nerve examinations showed nothing new, nothing to report, but I *could* smell. That much was certain.

The doctors would later tell me that for whatever reason, the disease was regressing, something they had not seen or heard of until now. Scent and taste came back to me at about fifty-five percent, but for me, it could have been one hundred. Anything was better than zero. They also told me about a new implant device that worked wonders on deaf patients, specifically deaf patients like me who had lost the ability to hear at a young age. They told me I was a perfect candidate for it and that they'd love to put me through the program. The implants would allow me to hear sounds around twenty percent with the promise of progression, and although I would never be able to hear completely, I would hear some loud noises, and muffled sounds of voices. Veyda seemed excited about this possibility for me, but when I asked if it would work for her, the doctors told me she wasn't a candidate for the program. She assured me she was okay with me having the implants placed, but I never went through with it.

But you could hear again, even partially. Isn't that what you've always wanted? To hear the sounds of the world?

I shake my head and reach for her hands, kissing the tips of her fingers along the way.

I hear everything, Veyda. And nothing is as loud as you.

She smiles at me, the same smile she's always given me and I pull her against my chest.

Epilogue

I NEVER DO lose my ability to see. I watch my children grow and hang onto Veyda like she is something they never want to let go of. I wake up every morning and press my lips against hers, and drink her in the way the Earth drinks in the dawn.

Life is loud, and blinding at times. It can also be bland, quiet, and even dull, but in those moments where it lacks the full force to be seen, it is still beating on. There has never been anything louder in my life than silence, and I love the way that silence sounds.

Hayley lives in Ohio with her husband and pets. She is an avid lover of Tom Petty, exploring, flamingos, and of course, writing. When she isn't writing, she works as a PR Coordinator for an Orthodontist and because of this, is always smiling. She has a soft spot for poetry and thrillers, and loves a good scary movie any time of the year.

Find more of Hayley's works here

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